Tabi ni Deyou Volume 1

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Tabi_ni_Deyou:Volume_1

旅に出よう、滅びゆく世界の果てまで。

萬屋直人
イラスト：方密

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旅に出よう、滅びゆく世界の果てまで。

萬屋直人

電撃文庫
¥590

電撃文庫

Illustrations

These are novel illustrations that were included in volume 1

OUR JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE CEASING WORLD

Tadahito Yorozuya
Illustrations: Houmitsu

Tadahito Yorozuya

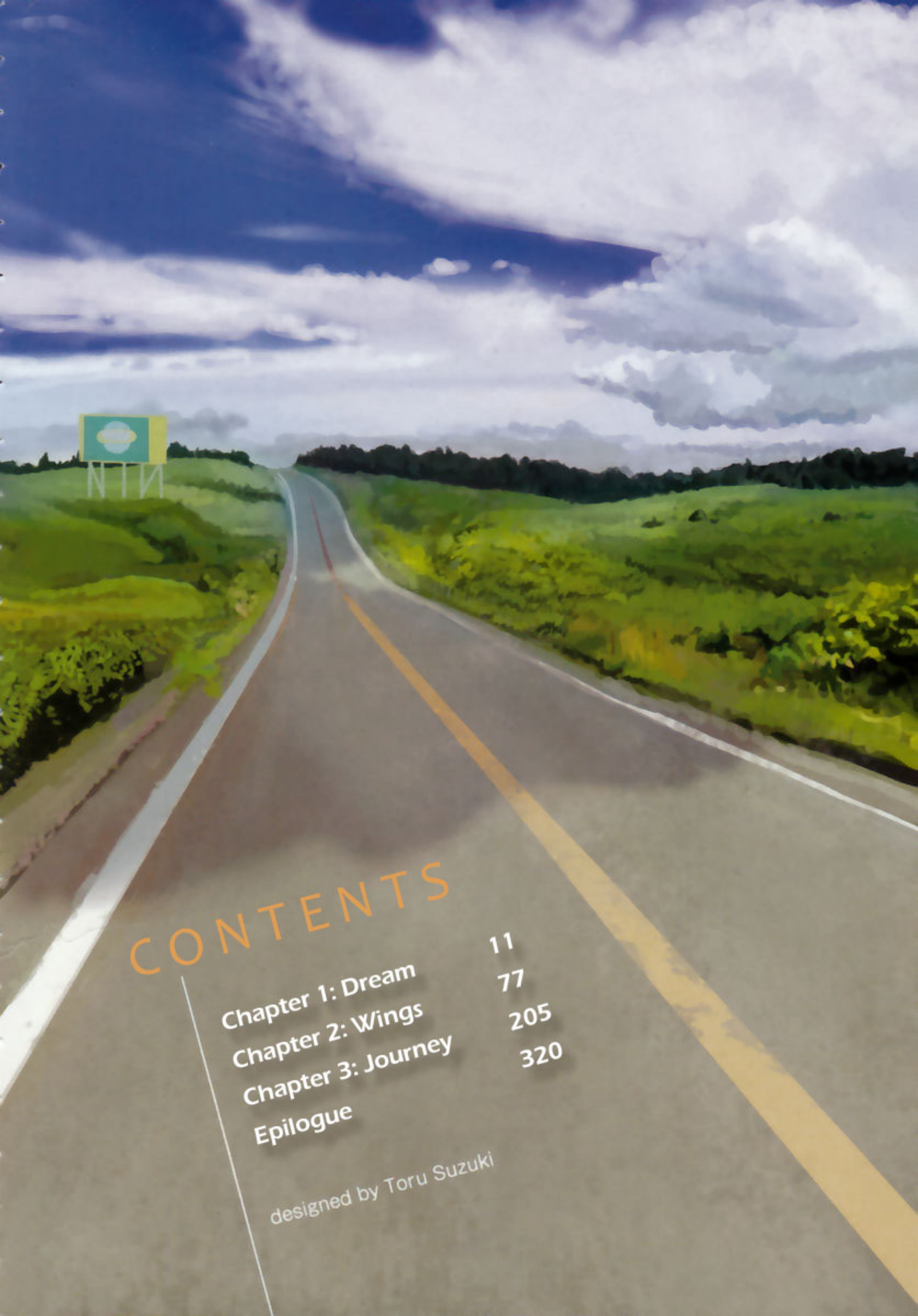
Illustrations: Houmitsu

"Boy?"
"Mhm?"
"Was the next town really this way?"
"Mmm... I was pretty sure until just now."
"..."
"..."
"Whatever."
"We have good weather today, so yeah."

"... I don't like rain."
"Really? Personally, I don't have anything against it."
"Why not?"
"Clothes get wet in the rain, right?"
"What about it?"
"It lets me see through yours."
"You're such a pervert."
HONDA
super CUB
MADE IN CHINA

"There is this saying that 'one should live without regrets', right?"
"Yeah."
"That's just stupid."
"You think so?"
"No matter what choices you make, you will always have at least a few regrets and will want to look back. Isn't it obvious?"
"So you think what's important is to just not keep looking back at the past?"
"Exactly!"

"Boy? What would you do if I vanished one day?"
"I would search for you."
"What if you couldn't find me anyway?"
"You can only say that once you stop searching! But let me ask this question back to you: what would you do if I vanished?"
"I..."



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designed by Toru Suzuki

"Will you leave everything behind and go on a journey with me?"

I wonder how many people could answer such a question right away.

But whatever their number might be, I could.

The scene that day is still indelibly engraved in my memory like a photograph.

"Will you leave everything behind and go on a journey with me?"

My answer was "Yes".

Dream

"...So? Can you fix it?"

A girl stood over a boy with a wrench in his hand. In reply, he moaned with a face that suggested a week of constipation.

"I've been trying for four days now, but as things stand , we might reach the next town before I get this done."

"That's not what I wanted to hear! The next town is still miles away."

With a dry laugh, the girl sat down on a bench. The dry wood, cracked by the persistently shining sun, pricked her exposed legs, but at the moment her fatigue overcame the discomfort. She was wearing a typical school uniform blazer, but because of the heat she had taken off her jacket and was fanning herself with her hand.

"Maybe you're just not cut out for fixing things, boy. You're not going to get any praise for having pushed a broken motorcycle 140 miles, you know?"

"*Please* stop bugging me about it. We're always moving , so I don't have the time to do extensive repairs."

The boy who had been addressed as "boy" tapped his stiff shoulders with the wrench. He was wearing the same uniform as the girl, though of course the boys' version. He had taken off his jacket and necktie, and had unbuttoned his collar as well.

True, there was a limit to the repairs he was able to perform. For their journey, they had bodged a pillion seat on to their originally one-person Super Cub and loaded it with things like food, clothes, gasoline, and water. Two people's luggage meant there was little space left for much in the way of tools.

Bolts and nuts constituted the sum of their parts stock, along with oil and a spark plug. Considering that their tools consisted of just spanner and hex keys and a folding Gerber Knife, a proper repair was beyond even their dreams.

"Maybe we should just trash it..." he suggested.

"Don't be silly. Do you plan on carrying all this luggage on your back?"

"Ngh." The boy was nonplussed after his unrealistic suggestion was shut down. "Then could you at least help me push it, girl?"

"No way." The girl who he had called "girl" glared at him. "What do you think you're doing, trying to make a lady like me to do heavy labor? You even fail at humor."

"Heh, a track and field girl is calling herself a lady? You're probably more muscular than I am."

Her response was a kick in his side.

I guess the lady didn't appreciate the joke. Ouch.

"I guess we'll camp here tonight. At least it's better than pitching a tent in the middle of the road, right?"

"Mmm, Can't argue with that."

They were stopped at a rest area that had been established for nearby farmers. It was only a toilet, a water supply, and some benches among a handful of trees, but it was just what the two of them needed. In areas like this where there is nothing other than a long road and endless meadows, rest areas are more valuable

than anything else. Just try sleeping on an asphalt road once: you'll be attacked by insects, hurt your back on the hard ground and be assaulted by the morning heat.

"Well, let's get ready for night then. It's going to get dark soon."

"Mm," the boy nodded. The hour hand of his dear chronograph was already past six. Admittedly, the rather old-fashioned wind-up mechanism wasn't that accurate, but judging from the reddening sky, the time it indicated was probably about right.

"OK, girl, please prepare dinner then. I'll take care of the beds."

"Got it, boy."

They both started with their respective tasks without once calling each other by name.

From the Super Cub's luggage carrier, which they had extended down both sides of the rear wheel, the boy removed a big bundle of their sleeping equipment, while the girl took out a bag once stuffed with ingredients but was now mostly empty except for cookware. Then they set to their respective tasks.

The boy went to two old wooden benches that were sitting end-to-end. Despite being well-worn, they were ideal for his purpose: barely long enough to stretch one's legs out on them and free of disturbing objects like a back or armrests. Even better, the benches were set up between two trees at their sides. Perfect.

He slowly took out some small rolled-up blankets from the bundle. There were eight of those sheets in total, carefully compacted and secured using a clever technique they had thought up. They would therefore get four sheets apiece. On each bench, he folded a pair of these sheets three times and laid them down as a sleeping mat. Then, he laid one sheet down on each bench as a blanket. Though it was summer, they were in the high north on an island, so the weather could change in an instant. The last two blankets he rolled up as pillows.

Next, he made a roof using a laundry line and a large blue sheet. He tied the line to the tree trunks, stretching it over their improvised beds, and pulled the blue sheet over it. The roof was made tent-shaped by placing a weight on each corner. That would be enough to shield them from sunlight as well as from light rain. The arrangement would be pretty vulnerable to the wind, but

tying it to the Super Cub, would probably prevent it from being blown away.

Finally, he placed a hollow ceramic pig which had been to the side of the luggage carrier between the benches and loaded its belly with a mosquito coil.

All set!

"Oh?"

After completing the camping preparations, an appetizing smell wafting his way caused the boy to turn and look.

What greeted his eyes was not merely a delicious meal, but a crucial part of every man's dream—a girl preparing dinner in an apron. She was using a small gas camp stove and a little frying pan to warm some corned beef and canned white asparagus.

While he wasn't too happy about the asparagus, the aroma of the beef roasting in butter called out to his empty stomach and he had to struggle to keep it quiet.

She divided the small meal into two portions with their pocketknife, took out two slices of bread from an

airtight container and sandwiched half of the ingredients between them. Finally, she toasted the sandwich as a whole.

Though the knife wasn't really meant for cooking, the girl moved skillfully and the sandwich was completed in no time. It was topped with the perfect amount of mustard, and the golden-brown color of the toasted bread made him even hungrier.

However, the boy did not eat the sandwich right away.

They had, after all, decided to always eat their meals together.

While the girl was preparing a similar sandwich—with a rather different amount of mustard—for herself, the boy struggled to hold back a waterfall of saliva that was threatening to flow from his mouth.

"Okay, I'm done. Let's eat!"

The girl swiftly untied her apron and sat down on her temporary bed.

"..."

Then she noticed the boy's stare.

"...What?"

"Ah, I just thought that you've become quite girl...like."

Ow! my shin!

"What's that supposed to mean!"

"No, uhm, the way you cook and take off your apron makes you look somehow..." *To be honest, she rather gave the impression of a housewife, but I don't think I would survive telling her that.*

"Well, even *you* would get used to it if you had to play chef for three months straight!"

"I'm sorry for pushing it on you all the time! ...Anyway , let's eat."

"Yeah yeah."

The girl sat down again and picked up her sandwich.

They gave each other a slight smile and took their first bites at the same time.

Neither of them talked to the other, but they exchanged smiles from time to time.

Both the succulent corned beef and the spicy mustard whetted their appetites, so they both dug ravenously into their sandwiches. It was so tasty that the boy didn't even mind the asparagus.

The only bad thing about it was that there was but one bite left.

The boy threw the last bit into his mouth with slight regret, and dusted the bread crumbs from his hands.

"Thanks for the meal."

"Yeah. Thanks for the meal."

The girl folded her hands.

"...By the way, boy."

"Mm?"

"...We're out of bread and beef now."

"Whahua?!"

The girl gave him a cold, hard look.

"It's been a week since we last picked up any food supplies. If you don't get that bike working, starting tomorrow asparagus will be the *only* thing on the menu!"

"I-Is that a threat?!"

"Of course not. I'm just informing you, *my dear driver*."

This verbal blow sent the boy spiraling from cloud nine to the pits of despair. The girl, who had no problems with eating asparagus, beamed at him. He found that she looked more hateful than triumphant, though. *Damn. I seriously have to get this fixed...!*

Looking up, he noticed that the sun was just about to go completely below the horizon. The dusk remaining slowly faded and thick darkness blanketed the world. It wouldn't be long until they would be completely blanketed by the dark.

To fight back, he turned on a lamp comprised of an LED penlight and a few fluorescent sticks.

"It's already dark out. How about you hit the sack, girl ?"

"Huh—? You're staying up?" The girl frowzily turned her head toward him. She had had already lain down on her bed some time before the boy told her to.

"I still have to write today's diary entry...Haven't you noticed that the entries have taken a rather tragic turn for the last few days?"

"Of course. There really hasn't been anything good to say since then. Like I told you before, we're running really low on supplies."

"What about water?"

"I think we're OK for now, but all we have left is from the water tower, so we need to boil it tomorrow."

They were in a truly dire situation. They had enough fuel for the Super Cub, but it would be too dangerous to boil water with it. At most they could use it to help start a fire.

The boy sighed deeply and took a thick volume from the bookbag they kept random things in.

It wasn't really a book; but their diary. The front cover was blank, so you couldn't tell what it was originally supposed to be used for, but the two of them used this massive book to record their travels. It was about two inches thick, and the corners of its hard cover were reinforced with brass. It even had a belt around it with a matching brass lock.

The key for the diary was on the same key chain as the ignition key for the Super Cub. As always, the boy opened the lock, turned to that day's page, and put pencil to paper.

The white penlight provided more than enough illumination for him to write. It shone with an artificial light that balanced against the stars twinkling in the purple night sky. In contrast to the countless lights above , below there was only the penlight and the glowing mosquito coil.

After about 10 minutes, the boy finished his diary entry. He resealed the book with its key and returned it to the bookbag. Then he turned off the light and lay down on his improvised bed.

The penlight left behind a green afterimage behind on their retinas, and as if to compensate for its absence, the stars in the dark sky seemed to brighten in their eyes.

All that could be seen were the kaleidoscopic orbs painting the heavens, endless meadows carpeting the land from horizon to horizon, and a narrow gray road slicing through the landscape.

And in one corner of that scene, two travelers slowly fell asleep.

Back pain woke the girl the next morning.

She opened her eyes, and found herself lying on the bare ground. Her body was contorted into the posture of a stereotypical murder victim. If someone were to draw a chalk line around her body, she would form a perfect corpse. Obviously, she hadn't been murdered, but had merely fallen from her makeshift bed. Seeing no need to

panic, she stirred herself and sat up. The other bed was already empty. A few yards away, the boy was dueling with the Super Cub, wielding a spanner in one hand.

"...Quite the early bird, aren't you?"

"'Early to bed and late to rise' isn't a good thing, you know?"

The girl was, however, no longer groggy enough to ignore such an insolent remark. She let him off with a kick to his back for now.

Satisfied by seeing the boy fall over in pain, she tried to relax her sore back by taking yoga-like poses, twisting her hips left and right, and finally stretching her arms up as high as she could reach. She considered running through a whole set of calisthenics, but she cut her stretching short and finished with a deep breath on the grounds that doing them by herself would look pretty pathetic.

"But boy, did you get up early so you could fix the bike?"

"Well, yeah. Otherwise it would get too hot before I finish." The boy took off his work gloves, which were

black with oil and carbon. "Anyway, as soon as I'm through with this, I will have done everything I can. If it still doesn't work, then we can't fix it with what we have on hand."

"Uwaa, so now it's make-or-break, huh." The girl smiled wryly and started to gather everything she needed to treat their water.

As all of the water they had remaining had been taken from an unsafe source, she prepared to sterilize it by boiling. Using their small gas stove to heat such a large amount of water would be wasteful, so instead she collected branches and dried grass for an open fire. After arranging them on a brick, she lit the kindling using the boy's Zippo lighter.

It was already past seven in the morning and the sun was rising steadily. Before they knew it, the northern island's cool night air had been completely swept away and the hot summer sun beat down on them with the same intensity as it did in the other parts of the country.

While the girl labored at her torrid work, the boy continued his repair attempt.

The Super Cub's engine was actually rather simple. In fact, the boy had become quite good at disassembling its single-cylinder four-stroke engine.

He could, however, do little in the way of actual repairs beyond adjusting parts that had come out of alignment and tightening loose bolts. There wasn't enough space on the bike to carry spare parts in case something actually broke. If that was the source of their current problems, then they were in quite a bind indeed.

The bike had endured a lot of abuse from its previous owner; a broken part wasn't exactly unlikely. Bolts had come loose, rivets were damaged, the head gasket was developing a crack, and the oil was dirty. The tires and brake pads had become as smooth as a bald head, and the suspension was worn out. Unfortunately, they still needed the Super Cub to hold out for a good while longer.

"I wish I could get some replacement parts..." murmured the boy. *Or if I could at least get my hands on some fresh oil, I could clean the parts we have.* Though there wouldn't be any point in cleaning the parts if they would

immediately become contaminated by the dirty oil in the engine.

"So, how does it look?" The boy was addressed from behind.

"Suboptimal."

"Uh-oh. Should I get ready for a walk?"

"Maybe? Well, we'll find out really soon." He gripped the handlebars, work gloves still on, and placed his foot on the starter pedal.

...Please, God, make this work, he prayed, and stomped on the starter pedal with all his might.

The engine turned over a few times, emitting a weak chugging sound. Even the girl, who had little experience with machines, could tell that it was a failure.

"..."

Not one to give up so quickly, he tried again. This time , he not only prayed to God, but also to the Super Cub itself.

"Aaaaand go!"

It made the same burdened chugging, but this time it stopped with a loud clank.

"...sigh."

It seemed that neither God nor the Super Cub felt like answering his prayer.

After giving up on repairing the bike, they started quickly packing.

Three months had passed since they started their journey, and with all that practice they had become accordingly efficient in their daily tasks. They poured the newly-disinfected water into two-liter bottles and stuffed a few useful-looking pieces of firewood in a special bag after breaking them into smaller pieces. Their camping equipment managed to wander back into the bundle, and they attached it to the silent Super Cub.

In the 30 minutes required they had already become soaked with sweat.

Though they were pretty far north, it was past nine and the summer sun was already broiling the land without mercy. If they could, they would have loved to ask the sun to lower its thermostat, but their voices would never be heard from 93 million miles away.

"Are we going to throw Cubby away after all?" Holding a helmet in one hand, the girl tapped her other hand on the saddle of their silver Super Cub. The black synthetic leather had already become too hot to touch for long. "I wish we could get it fixed somehow. I mean, we finally got used to riding on it together.

"Well, you've got a point there. Neither of us has ever used any other vehicle before, so we might not be able to use another bike even if we found one." The Super Cub is generally considered to be ideal for new riders because it was designed to be simple to operate... "But if it doesn't work..."

"Then it's useless junk!"

The girl kicked the Super Cub.

That moment, as if to protest the abuse of his dear two-wheeler, the boy's stomach suddenly growled. The girl's stomach, too, started growling in response.

"..."

"What are *you* looking at?! I haven't had breakfast either, so of course I'm hungry!"

"Ah, I was just surprised at how loud your stomach can...Ah—ouchouchouch!!"

The girl pulled his earlobe, stopping his words in their tracks.

"I'll cut your rations for that comment!"

"What am I, a dog?!"

"If you're not, then use your calories to move your feet instead of talking!"

"...it hardly uses any energy to talk..."

The girl did not object, but merely murmured something while taking a can out from the bag attached to the rear wheel and sat down on the nearest bench.

"It's hardtack. You don't have any problems with this, right?"

"...but it's too bland."

"Oh my! Aren't you the spoiled brat?"

"You complain as much as I do."

"Shut up. I made sure to prepare something. Look." She placed something next to the hardtack — a jar of strawberry jam.

"Happy? This is the best we have. We don't have much in the way of fruit preserves like this, so you better not use it all up."

"Yes, Ma'am!"

With only a few ounces of spread, the dry and tasteless hardtack would blossom into a graceful dessert. When they opened the jar, a sour yet fruity fragrance wafted out and sharpened their hunger.

"Shall we eat then?"

They took out enough for one meal and ate breakfast before departing. Having replenished a little energy, the pair's steps seemed a lot lighter than they had the day before.

What we know as a "mirage" the Japanese call " escaping water." It is the refraction of light by hot air over a very hot flat surface, resembling reflections off of a nonexistent pool of water. Because it only occurs a long way off, you can never reach the pool and so the water is said to "escape." Since the boy and girl were both born and raised in a large city, mirages were a new and interesting experience, but it didn't take long before they became merely nerve-wracking.

They had already walked half a day, getting roasted both by the sun's rays from above and heat radiating up from below. Other than four short breaks, they had walked non-stop.

From time to time, they could even sense malice that seemed to come from the sun. However, any traces of emotion they displayed in reaction seemed to evaporate into a shimmer of hot air. They trudged on in a robotic state, pushing the bike with vacant expressions.

The scenery around them was exactly the same as half a day before, consisting solely of an endlessly long road flanked by meadows on both sides. The only thing that had changed was the angle from which they were being roasted by the sun.

"...I'm hot," murmured the girl while pushing the Super Cub along from the side.

"...What a coincidence...So am I," replied the boy while equally pushing the bike's handlebars from the other side .

This was the first conversation they had had in an hour. Their steps were as unreliable as a sleepwalker's, and they would have long since fallen down if they hadn't been leaning on the Super Cub while they were pushing it.

The boy had taken off his white shirt and was using it as a sunshade, while the girl had put a small plastic sheet on her head.

The heat would have been much less torturous if they could at least dampen their makeshift sunshades, but they had none to spare. They only had ten liters of water remaining, enough for them to last five days at the very most. Since they couldn't predict when they would find their next water source, careless water use could spell death for both of them.

If everything were working normally, they might have been able to call for help with a mobile phone, but that was not the case. Because the cellular infrastructure had broken down, mobile phones had turned into mere pocket lamps with an included clock, calendar, camera, and notebook functionality. The boy's phone, however, had run out of batteries, rendering it entirely useless.

"...why can't there...at least be a downhill slope..."

"...don't even say it...If you remind me...that we're still going uphill...I'll lose all my strength..."

They were struggling up the worst kind of incline. Even though the road continued straight all the way to the horizon, it gently rose the whole way. The effort

needed to push the bike up the slight slope sapped their energy like a leech, and their legs grew heavier and heavier.

"It's still quite a ways...to the next city...are we really going to be okay like this...?"

"Hang in there...girl! Look, we're almost...to the top."

"...I hope it'll be steep...enough to ride down on the bike."

Silently agreeing with her, the boy took a few more steps. He firmly gripped the handlebars of the heavily laden bike for one last push, and they finally arrived at the top of the slope.

"Haaah," the girl panted aloud. She turned to the road they had just climbed up. The gentle slope continued downward unceasingly until it merged in the sky. The rest area which they had departed from that morning was already beyond the horizon. "We walked quite a bit just now, didn't we..."

When the boy didn't react to her murmur, the girl turned to him. She found him peering through a pair of binoculars he had taken out of their bag.

"Do you see something?"

"...over there..."

The girl just cocked her head, so he thrust the binoculars into her hands.

At first she was startled by a blurry view, but after a quick focus adjustment, she saw another downward slope that mirrored the one they had just come up. When she raised the binoculars to look at the horizon, she saw a small patch where the color of the vegetation was a little different. It wasn't very big, but a section of the grassy area was covered with a slightly more intense green than its surroundings.

".....it's farmland... and there's a house, boy!"

The magnified image was shaking in her tired hands, but it was certainly someone's residence. No doubt about it: by the side of the road dividing the green scenery was a roof and some cultivated land.

The ground was sectioned off by what looked like hand-made fences and seemed to be cultivated with fruits and vegetables. They could even see a rice paddy

next to it. The land was in good order and had clearly been recently maintained by someone.

Of course, it wasn't possible to tell if anybody was actually there from this distance, but any place that has ever been inhabited must have had a water supply. And judging from the greener vegetation they saw, there was probably some water left.

"Let's get going, boy! It's right over there at the horizon ! We'll be there in no time!"

"All right!"

The girl tossed the binoculars back into the bag and they started pushing the bike down the hill with renewed vigor. While the slope wasn't steep enough for them to coast on the bike, their destination was in sight and they were filled with a sudden burst of energy.

After sprinting just over halfway at full speed, they remembered that the distance to the horizon varies depending on the ground level.

"I'm dying."

"Me too."

The conversations between them had at last decreased to a few words from time to time. It was only natural, though, because they had pushed their bike at a run over a distance that would be classified "long" in track and field athletics. On top of that, they were having a hard time holding their bike back because the steepness of the second half was nasty and added to their labor. While it wasn't as bad as during the rising slope, it was no comparison to walking on a flat ground.

Nevertheless, they eventually reached the house in question. Their shadows had grown long and from somewhere one could hear a crow's call.

The girl didn't have enough power left to even raise her head, therefore it was the boy who set the kickstand of the bike and approached the building.

"Could this be... a general store and farm combination... ?" he muttered to himself, while surveying the isolated house and the field with his gaze.

On the left side of the road was a general store which was also used as a residence and on the right side was cultivated land. Both of them showed signs of human maintenance.

The combination of the gray road running through a landscape of green meadows and this small "foreign matter" in the middle of it somehow reminded him of a railway and its station. He could also see lots of vegetables that were nearing harvest. It had been a long time since he had last seen such scenery. Tomatoes, shining bright red in the sunlight, cucumbers, so big he started to suspect that the growers were using strange chemicals, and types of vegetables he hadn't seen in ages were swaying in the wind.

"Wow..... hey, girl... girl? Whoa! Girl! Are you OK?!"

The girl, who was supposed stand behind the Super Cub, had fallen prostrate on the hot ground without moving a muscle. Most likely, it was not just the crimson light of the slowly setting sun that dyed her face red.

The boy heaved her up in a hurry and walked towards the field, searching for a source of water. There should be a source of water for it. Maybe he would be going to get scolded for entering without permission, but in that case he could do nothing but apologize.

However, when he was about to pass by the general store, something that was rather out-of-place caught his eye.

A foreign automobile was parked in the shadow of the building - a very luxurious one at that.

That shiny thing on its bonnet that was sparkling despite being in the shadow looked like the Mercedes-Benz emblem. The boy wasn't very interested in the car market, but it reeked of money just by looking at the big aluminum wheels and the real leather seats. A white-gloved chauffeur, brushing off the dust from that gorgeous car with a feather duster, would have fit perfectly into the picture.

But why on earth would such a rich Mercedes driver want to work on a field in the northern back of beyond?

He couldn't wipe away his wonderment, but right now the girl he was lending a shoulder seemed to on the verge of melting away, so he hurried to the fields.

While admiring the fabulous condition of the tomatoes and the cucumbers, he slipped through between them and headed deeper into the area. It was hard to search for a source of water while carrying the exhausted girl, but he found one surprisingly quickly.

It was a watering place that was built like a well and was located almost exactly in the center of the field along the road.

Right behind of it was the face of an artificial, small hill-like construction, which was reinforced with stones and equipped with a PVC pipe. Surprisingly clear water flowed out of that pipe into an overflowing concrete basin.

After making the girl sit down on the stone bench beside it, the boy grabbed himself a plastic wash bowl that was floating in the basin and started scooping water.

Well, and then:

"Wake up, girl!"

Sunstroke, heatstroke, an empty stomach and exhaustion had almost turned the girl into a dried cuttlefish, so, to help her, he splashed it all on her with vigor.

"...whatrya doing you MORON!?"

With a lightning right hand, the girl stole the wash bowl from him and smashed it against his face. Without water.

On the left side was, the boy holding his nose. On the opposite side, the girl wet from head to toe. Each of them took a weapon within reach, scooped some water and then stood still, facing each other.

"..."

"..."

Both of them crouched, taking an attack stance, and at the very moment before a dramatic splashing contest would have started, a voice interrupted them.

"Hello there! Are you guests?"

The boy and girl turned around to the owner of the voice while letting the water in their bowls pour to the ground. And then, both of them were thunderstruck.

There was a brightly smiling man who wiped away his sweat. A man in his forties, probably, and still in the prime of life was standing there with a straw hat, a towel, a pair of leather boots, a white shirt and an Armani suit, which was rolled up to his knees. His slender yet firm body reminded of the typical sports teacher and his warm smile strongly suggested the landed gentry. He was the living example that a gentleman remains a gentleman even when working on a farm.

However, it wasn't his sudden appearance or his contrastive outfit that surprised them. What surprised them most was his hair.

His hair was not deep-black as it was supposed to be, but snow white like after using some strong decolorant. Moreover, his skin was almost as white as an albino's, showing no signs of tanning despite his work under the blazing sun.

"Oh, did I startle you?"

"Ah, no, um..."

"Excuse us for staring at you like this."

She lowered her head. This gave the boy the feeling that women might be more skillful in apologizing than men. It was kind of the wrong time to think about such things, though.

Because the two travelers had just come through hovering between life and death and the man was currently making a pause anyway, they decided to sit down on the stone bench and take a break.

The bench was broad enough for about five people and, thanks to the roof that was installed over it, they were protected from the sunlight. Because the water trough was right over there, it was much cooler than on the asphalt road. The ground had gotten wet with the water the boy had splashed on it, but the midsummer sun was drying it. Of course, the same applied to the soaking wet girl.

"...Ah, right. I should introduce myself. This is who I am,"

He took out a little case from his chest pocket, with truly fluent movements at that, and held a business card out to them while giving them a nod.

This sequence of movements was already brought to perfection and made it clear that he had been used to doing this in his daily life.

« Transport Corporation, Representative Director» was written on it.

The name of the transport company and the name of the person himself were missing.

There were no traces of a misprint or abrasion; the letters themselves had completely vanished. In fact, the paper was perfectly fine. It was almost like he had made empty cards for fun.

One had to concentrate to see it, but only the logo of the company was printed faintly in a corner of the card.

I'm not too sure, but I think that was a quite famous company.

"...well, it's not like there is a point in giving you a business card without my name on it, though."

The boy reluctantly looked up at the bitterly smiling man.

"So... it was «lost»?"

"Yeah, exactly. My name has vanished," he stated plainly. "One day while I was working at the company as usual, the people in my department told me that they had forgotten my name. I had a bad feeling about it because they couldn't remember whatever they tried, so I investigated that matter. What I discovered was that my name had disappeared from all kinds of places: from the data and documents of the company, from my own business cards, my name plate and so on. But what's most, I myself was unable to recall my name."

On hearing the indifferent tone in his voice, the boy and the girl exchanged glances and returned their attention to the man again.

"Even our business partners had forgotten my name altogether. Some among them had even forgotten my face. Well, you can imagine how wearisome it was to continue to work like that."

The man let out a laugh and put the business card back into the case.

"In the end, I could see no point in continuing my work anymore, so I threw everything away and left. After some time of wandering around the country I eventually settled down here. ...Do you want to join me?"

It wasn't farm work that he offered them, but some bright red tomatoes that had been cooled with spring water to an appealing temperature and reflected the sunlight.

It goes without saying that their "Yes" wasn't long in coming.

"...To tell you the truth, I've always wanted to work in agriculture. Yet, I ended up employed in a transport company for vegetables. After a period of hard work there, I suddenly became the head of a department, then a managing director, then the director of the branch and before I knew it, I had reached this age and had become the representative director of the main branch."

"...but that's quite amazing, isn't it?"

The boy set his eyes on the man while biting into his second red gem.

This fabulously mellow tomato was so luscious it almost seemed to burst. There was no comparison between the usual tomato juice and this wonderful fresh fruit flesh. A sense of wellbeing spread through his entire body, which hadn't received any fresh vegetables recently.

He had never thought that he could experience such a magnificent feeling with a mere tomato. Right now he was confident to be able to even munch a hated green pepper. Raw.

"Well, it may look amazing to others I guess. But you see, I liked my work and, as it seems, I had a talent for it. I was interested, so I was absorbed in what I was doing and had climbed high on my career ladder without noticing. But at the same time, I had also removed myself more and more from the work I actually wanted to do."

The girl was sitting next to the boy and having a hard time deciding whether she should ignore the danger of getting a stomach ache and set about a third tomato.

"Thus you made your dream of working on a farm come true under the convenient pretext that your name had been «lost». Uh-huh."

Her choice of words contained a thorny undertone. But not out of ill will. It was more something like sarcasm that she mixed into her words to tease him. The director seemed to be aware of this as well and flashed a smile.

"Yeah. This may be rude to my former colleagues in the company, but every day here is so much fun! ...Well, but the stuff I learned in school and my experience at work don't really come into any use."

The man smiled wryly.

"Why did you come all the way here from Honshu anyway? Wouldn't you have been able to find some cultivated land over there, too?"

"There's no real reason. It's not like I planned to work on a field from the very beginning. At first, I thought I'd drive about a bit for sightseeing, but then I came across this house here. At the time, an old woman was running the general store all on her own. She let me live here and taught me how to grow up vegetables, while I gave her a hand on the field."

"How is she doing now?"

"...in March this year... she vanished."

"...I see," the boy said thoughtfully, while the girl next to him at last gave in to the temptation and took a big bite of her third tomato.

At this moment.

"Oh, director? Do we have guests?"

A female voice had suddenly interrupted.

The beautiful voice was clear like an announcer's. Its owner stood amidst a corn field dyed in the colors of the setting sun.

At once, the corn grown tall enough for someone to hide in rustled and through it a female secretary appeared. Properly wearing a suit. You may call it a matter of course, but she was a stunning beauty.

"...you've got a secretary even for farm work?!"

They gave him a fierce clip in his belly. Of course, with some restraint.

After recovering from the agony, the director introduced the lady who had joined in the round.

"...uhm, she is my secretary. Since her name has been « lost», she's simply called secretary."

"I am the secretary. It is a pleasure to meet you."

The woman bowed in a truly beautiful angle.

This angle and the position of her hands were proof that she had brought these movements to perfection as a

part of her job. However, her suit was dirty and her skin, once white, had been browned by the sun. She was wearing a straw hat on top of her long, pretty black hair and holding some fresh-picked corn in both hands. A hand towel was draped over her shoulders and she wasn't wearing high heels but rubber boots. It was a queer contrast.

She gave them a bright smile, whereupon the two of them exchanged glances. The time to introduce themselves had come.

"Err... I'm simply the boy. My favorite dish at the moment is tomato."

"I'm the girl. My temporary favorite dish is tomato. There are plans to shift this to corn very soon."

They bowed together and were requited with the secretary's giggle; a delightful one that would have made for a perfect example of how to laugh brilliantly.

In the end, she decided to pause work as well and joined in the chatter. It was already 6pm. The environment was ideal for taking a break as the air was pleasantly fresh thanks to the gradually dropping temperature and the water nearby.

"Are you on a journey?"

"Yes. We dropped everything and went on a journey. So it's basically the same as it was for the director, isn't it? "

The secretary giggled again on hearing the girl's confident answer.

"Meaning you eloped with your boyfriend?"

"....."

When she asked this question, confident that she were spot-on, the girl's face froze with an uneasy expression. Then, with exactly that expression, she turned a look that contained a strange combination of doubt and expectation to the boy.

"Are you..... my boyfriend?"

She straight-out asked his view on the matter. Puzzled over how he should answer her, he put his hand under his chin and pondered.

"...we never made such an oath... I think."

When he had finally managed to work out this reply, he got kicked by her for whatever reason. This is what they call unreasonableness.

The secretary giggled once more. "I see you are on very good terms with each other. Don't make me jealous! "

After the secretary had said so, the girl stopped her kick assault and proceeded with her tomato.

"But doesn't that go for yourself too, secretary? I mean, you accompanied the director when he abandoned his company, and now you're even working on his farm. Don't you mix quite well in a sense?"

"Oh? But I have not abandoned my work at all?" the secretary said in a wholly stunned-seeming voice, surrounded by three wondering observers. "You see, my job is to support the director. I have not abandoned my work. The director is the only one who has."

"H-How can you say that! Sure, you've come here because of me, but I never forced you, did I?"

"None of your excuses! In spite of the fact that I only came along with you due to my job, you told me to «

please wash the tomatoes» and to «go get some water to wash the radish». How could I ever refuse your orders in my position?"

She pursed her lips, "Hmph!" and pushed the full corn basket upon the director. "Thanks to that I have gotten completely used to farm work. Anyway, I will go prepare some tea for our guests, so please wash these and make some grilled corn in the meantime, director."

"O-Okay."

After forcing this giant amount of corn upon the director - almost like a pile of documents - she went away at a good pace in order to make them some tea. The director followed her, leaving the boy and girl behind alone by the well.

Neither the director nor the secretary had shown any signs of wonderment when they didn't tell them their names.

The corn field rustled in the gentle wind. Behind it, they could see the slowly setting sun at the horizon.

"...Boy?"

"...Mhm?" he answered her whisper without giving her a look.

"The director's color is very weak, isn't it?"

"...Yeah."

His hair had turned completely white. His age was approximately somewhere between late thirties to mid-forties. Such white hair in this age would normally be nearly impossible, but that only applies to normal people.

It was the same for his skin. In comparison, the secretary had probably done equally or less work than he , but she was suntanned. However, *his* skin was pigment-poor, almost like an albino's.

"...Isn't it hot today?"

"...Well, it's already August..."

The sound of the secretary's hurrying steps cut into their pointless conversation.

She put a tray on the stone bench and, along with a refreshing sound, filled their cups with tea. It could be

expected that she, as a secretary, knew how to prepare delicious tea, but sadly it should be rather difficult to make full use of these skills for barley tea.

However, the served barley tea had been cooled with fresh spring water and was so chilly that the surface of their cups fogged.

The girl emptied the cup in one go, as if this was the etiquette in this land.

However, the sight of her gulping down the tea wasn't exactly "elegant".

"Ah, right!"

The two girls turned their gazes to the boy.

"What's the matter, boy?"

"Ah, it's not like it's urgent right now, but I was thinking about replenishing our reserves if the water isn't limited."

"Ah, I see..."

Asking gazes focused on the secretary.

"Yes. I think it is fine! This well seems to take its water from a natural spring after all."

"Yay! Fresh water ahoy!"

As the water is that clear, it shouldn't be necessary to boil it up. Mh... in that case, we ought to throw away the water from yesterday's rest area and fill with fresh. It feels kind of like a waste since we went through the trouble of disinfecting it, but that can't be helped.

"Alright, I'll go and fill our bottles up then."

"Eh? Wait, I'll help you."

"I'm fine, no worries. ...in return, you can save me some corn!"

The boy thrust his finger before her, lending weight to his words, after which the girl sat down again.

The secretary watched his back while he was getting the water, fanning himself due to the heat, with a somewhat meaningful look and muttered, "...he looks very kind. Get going and make him your boyfriend!"

The girl spat out a mouthful of barley tea. Mainly from her mouth. But wasn't there also some that came out of her nose...?

The secretary smiled wryly while patting her back.

"Is it really something to get that startled about? The pair of you slipping out of school and then starting a journey on a bike - what else other than a couple should this be?"

"W-Who knows? I mean, aren't there many different relationships between boys and girls apart from spouses, lovers and siblings?"

Her voice was hoarse because some tea had entered her wind-pipe.

"For instance, the relationship between a director and a secretary?"

The secretary giggled, but the girl averted her gaze uncomfortably.

"But you followed the director here although you aren't a couple, right?"

"Yes. Because I am his secretary."

"...so you have no special feelings for him?"

"Well... as things stand, not in particular?"

"Which means you're merely superior and employee?"

"Yes. After all, he had always addressed me using my surname or no name at all, so maybe he did not even know my full name to begin with?" she said and added a little quieter. "The truth will remain unrevealed though."

The unconcerned voice of the secretary and her amused smile were something to exceed the understanding of girl.

However, she could very much agree with the vague motive veiled in her words. The girl didn't intend to put her thoughts into words, but by looking into her eyes she also realized that secretary didn't seek her understanding anyway.

"And still you don't mind his egoism and keep helping his work on the field?"

"Yes. Because I have decided to stay."

"On this farm?"

"No. With him."

Her confident smile was very calm, yet fulfilled with a strong will.

For some reason, the girl became wholeheartedly embarrassed and felt that she was blushing up to the ears although it wasn't about herself.

Unable to endure, she averted her eyes and looked in another direction.

"...until death parts you?"

"Of course."

The girl heard a somehow triumphant voice from behind her and couldn't bear up against the impulse to scratch her head.

"......You have my support."

The secretary was a little surprised at this sudden and indirect yell, but then she replied with a beaming smile, " Thank you."

It was not an artificial smile like she used to use at work, nor was it an expression of comfort. It was the first wholehearted smile she showed them since they had met .

Just, it was a pity that neither the girl, who had her look turned away, nor the boy, who had gone to fetch their water, and not even the director, who was grilling the corn, could see it.

"Oi! I didn't know how much we'd need, so I just made lots of them!"

They turned around towards the direction of the voice and spotted the director in question bringing a full basket of corn with him.

"D-Director! Who on earth is going to eat all that?!"

The secretary's roaring rebuke made the director wince .

"But they're still so young... I thought they would eat about this much."

"Nobody can eat this much bare corn without any side dishes! ...It seems like we have to make this our dinner..... besides, I am still young, too."

"I-I'm sorry..."

"My... there is no helping it. Please call the boy."

Contrary to their original relationship, it was the director who was scolded. He walked back the way he had just come from with a confused face.

A fragrant smell arose from the basket that had been left here in his place. Apparently, the director had kindly prepared two types of corn for them. One that was grilled with no special seasoning and another that was first dipped in soy sauce.

The two girls gulped wordlessly.

"...I just remembered another reason why I am here."

"Eh?" She turned around to the secretary who had muttered something.

The secretary continued, still gazing at the steaming corn.

"......I am bad at cooking."

"...Hah."

What could be called a light conversation was still moving on, but their gazes and concentration were fully arrested by the corn.

"...The director is very good at it. Really."

"...It does look that way."

Less than a minute later, they were finally freed from the shackles of self-control and could reach out for the grilled corn.

"Ah... ouch, ugh..."

"That's what you get from eating without restraint! It seems like they will let us spend the night here, so just lie still for a while."

The boy smiled wryly and laid a cushion on the veranda for her as a substitute for a pillow.

The cause for her stomach ache was, naturally, overeating.

At the moment, the two of them were cooling down on the veranda at the back of the shop with fans in their hands.

"Geez... Wasn't it clear that you would get a stomach-ache from that much corn?"

"B-Be quiet already..."

Even her abusive remarks were lacking power. In the end, she had eaten a whole three cobs of corn. So it was certainly not a weak digestive system that was at fault for her stomach-ache.

Well, one must remember that it was freshly picked freshly grilled extra-big corn. Corn is said to be best immediately after being picked. He himself couldn't get enough of it, either, so he could understand her.

However, she had already eaten four cold tomatoes at the time. It was natural that even a stomach like hers, which made the boy think it was titan-made at times, would naturally hurt with such a lot of heavy food in it.

"Dammit...! Why does it have to be so tasty when it's grilled...!"

The boy was amazed at her undue complaints but kept quiet because he feared the consequences. Therefore, he decided for a slightly more reserved reply.

"Well, it was freshly grilled after all. It would be fraud if it wasn't tasty."

"...Word... I guess something like this suits us much better than high-class stuff like crabs and tuna."

"Indeed."

The boy agreed with a wry smile. However, he was pretty confident that the girl would take back that word the very moment when she actually saw some crab or tuna.

Incidentally, the boy had controlled himself a little and had only eaten two tomatoes and two ears of corn, which is why he was full but not in a "critical" state like the girl.

Judging only from her, it seemed true that women are hungrier than men.

By now, the heat that had tormented them during the day had gone down quite a bit. In the background one could hear the harmonic sound of wind chimes softly swaying. This melody was accompanied by the fragrance of summer - the smell of mosquito coil.

He suddenly turned his gaze to the garden. The thoroughly groomed garden was planted with some hydrangeas, whose season had already ended, and a bunch of the typical flowers of summer behind them.

A group of magnificent, tall sunflowers reflected the evening sun with their widely-spread yellow petals as if to substitute what they symbolized.

Further down the garden he could see a plastic greenhouse, which had apparently been repaired by the director. Because it was still midsummer, there was only soil inside.

But it seemed, they had already sown some sprouts; there were small green plants inside a row of neatly ordered planters.

"...Boy...?"

"Mhm?"

The girl suddenly addressed him with a reserved voice , but then got flustered herself.

Because they were alone and in the right mood, so she had called his name. But there was no topic.

Naturally unable to continue the debate on food, she opened and closed her mouth for a while like a goldfish.

"Um... err..."

"They're strawberries. They won't be ready for picking until next year, though. But you have to plant them already at this period."

The boy turned his head towards the sudden voice from behind.

The girl could just turn over on her side because she was lying down anyway. The director showed no signs of noticing the grudge in her eyes.

"To tell the truth, I love fruit just as much as I love vegetables. Oh boy, I'm so looking forward to next year!"

It was unclear to the boy and girl whether he loved *raising* them or *eating* them, but they didn't ask. It was probably both.

"Director, how is your stomach?"

"Please don't ask!"

The director sat down next to the boy while holding his painfully growling stomach.

Because he had made a great amount of grilled corn, the secretary had forced him to dispose of the left-overs. In other words: to eat the remaining corn.

It was obvious that after consuming such an amount of high-fiber corn, the toilet had become his best friend.

However, what had surprised him even more was the secretary. She had easily eaten up four corncobs and, on top of that, she had munched a miso-covered cucumber afterwards, calling it her dessert.

Considering the current state of the girl, he couldn't attribute it to "women have stronger stomachs than men" , but people that live in the middle of this giant land might just be built differently than them city folk. In a good sense, of course.

"So, did you manage to get rid of the corn in the end?"

"......Sorry. I left some over."

"My, my. Well, such 'a lot' decreased to 'some', so it should be fine."

But while I won't say you deserved it, I don't feel like helping you out, either.

Suddenly, "Director. Please come over here for a moment." A voice came from the kitchen.

The director got up with a pathetic-sounding " Heave-ho!" and headed to the kitchen, where he eventually left their sight. They could only dimly hear their conversation.

"Is there still something to do?"

"No. We are mostly done."

"Eh? Why did you call me then?"

"I do not think you would understand, director."

"Hah?"

"Never mind! You talk with me here for a while. No objections allowed."

"Hah..."

"Let us begin with the weather."

"Hah?"

The boy could virtually see the bewildered face of the director.

The lying girl gave the secretary the thumbs up in her mind. *Well done!*

She couldn't waste this extraordinary chance the secretary had provided.

"Boy."

"Mh~?" he replied absent-mindedly.

"I request your lap as my pillow."

"Eeh?!"

Ignoring any complaints, she crawled along the wooden veranda towards him like a caterpillar and invaded his lap with her head.

She also laid the cushion she had used as a pillow before on her stomach to prevent any worse stomach-ache.

"Shouldn't the roles normally be reversed?"

"It's fine in my case. I'm genuinely sick."

"So you call the stomach-ache of a glutton that has simply eaten too much 'sickness', huh... ou-ouch-ouch!?"

She punished his impudent remark by pinching his thigh. *Experience the proverb "Loose lips sink ships" with your very own body!*

"Geez... this is one hard pillow..."

"Please don't ask a man for the impossible!"

But even while saying so, he carefully moved her head to a place where it didn't hit against any bones. He felt a pleasant heaviness on his thighs.

There was a rather long silence between them then.

It was one of those calm moments, which they had almost never come to enjoy in their busy days of worrying about today's meal and tomorrow's fuel. No, listening to the sound of wind chimes while nestling a veranda with a filled stomach was something they had almost never experienced even in their past.

"...mnyah... this is happiness..."

"Yeah. Somehow I'm kinda sorry for making them care so much for us."

"...If you want, we can stay here for a few days? We aren't in a hurry after all, and they also said it would be fine."

"There you go again. How would you answer if I agreed?"

"I would disagree. I mean, we are on a journey. While it's okay to stay somewhere to get our provisions, I don't intend to stay somewhere just for some rest."

"Don't ask me then."

"But it would be unfair if I didn't at least hear out your opinion."

One may wonder if there was a point in doing this when the result would stay the same anyway.

"Well, I'm here to accompany you wherever you go."

"I see," the girl said as if she had comprehended everything and closed her eyes.

In fact, the boy had worked a little by helping them out on the field or by doing some housework during the time the girl had been put out of commission.

He did not, however, consider this enough for a night's board and lodging. Leaving aside the housework, the director had almost only been teaching him things about farm work, so it wasn't labor at all.

Paying with money was no option, either. In this region, where the physical distribution has pretty much been cut off, money wasn't worth much anymore. But did he have anything else other than cash that he could give them...?

When he searched his pockets for his wallet, a little book fell out of it to the ground.

It was a notebook with a green vinyl-cover - the notebook containing his student information.

He opened it and, naturally, found his picture and name on the first page.

However, his name had completely vanished from the corresponding field.

"...my picture has faded quite a lot, huh..."

The colors of this picture, in which he was scowling grimly, had changed from weak pastel into nearly monochrome.

If it went on like this, it was just a matter of time until it would become entirely white as well.

It was a few minutes later when the boy noticed that the girl was breathing calmly on his lap.

While the secretary was changing the soundly sleeping girl into her pajama, the boy prepared their beds by taking out two guest-futons from the closet, assisted by the director.

Suddenly, the boy recalled something most important.

"Director. Are there any tools for repairing a motorbike in this house?"

"A motorbike? ...Ah, right. You came here on a motorcycle. Is it broken?"

"Yes. For the last five days."

The director made his eyes wide.

"...my sympathies! Tell me, what do you need?"

"Since I just need to replace some parts, a few simple tools, parts, of course..., and some fresh oil should do it."

"Mhm. Let's search the storage shed. Maybe we'll find something there."

With these words the director headed to the garden, followed by the boy.

Nighttime. The sun had completely disappeared from the sky, and the world, the little general store in the middle of the meadows was no exception. It too was shrouded in the veil of darkness. Since naturally there was no electricity, the only light source was one of those antique lanterns. Nevertheless, its warm orange light was bright enough for their eyes that had adjusted to the darkness and lit the room. Apparently, the candle used was homemade. To the boy and girl, this softly swaying but brightly shining candle seemed very unique and characteristic for 'this place'.

Because it was *such a place*, there was no traffic noise and hurly-burly like in the city, which they were used to. Instead, one could hear the mighty mixed chorus

performed by the insects of summer, which had to be an annoying impediment to sleep for unaccustomed people.

In the boy's case, this amount of noise was nothing special. He hadn't been traveling for three months merely for show.

However, there were situations that even the boy had trouble dealing with.

For instance when he was under immense mental pressure - like now, that the girl was sleeping on the futon right next to him.

He couldn't imagine the director doing something like this, so it probably was one of the secretary's jokes. Their two futons were placed tightly beside each other without any space between, which made it look like the scene of a wedding night.

But the secretary made a miscalculation. Surely she was expecting that he would blush like a tomato and move his futon away. Too bad, that was wrong. The boy was a healthy high schooler - such a sweet happening was rather exactly what he wished for. As long as it wouldn't make the girl scorn him.

He sat down next to their luggage and started preparing for their departure tomorrow while humming a song.

Since they wouldn't be able to take vegetables with them under this scorching sun, asking for some provisions was out of question. Thus, the problem concerning the food remained unsolved, but there was no use worrying about that now. There was nothing else they could do but stuff themselves as full as possible before departing.

But naturally there were things that had changed for the better since morning.

Namely, he had come upon a way to repair their Super Cub.

When he had gone searching the storage shed together with the director, they had found several usable parts. Even the type of the spark plug was the same, so it was easily conceivable that a Super Cub had been stored here in the past.

With those parts, it would certainly be possible to repair the bike.

"...ah."

He took their diary out of the luggage when he suddenly recalled it. Today was the girl's turn because the boy had written it yesterday. *She's not going to wake up anyway, so I'll lay it next to her pillow.*

"Mhh? What is that book?"

The boy raised his head when someone suddenly posed such a question.

Through the crack that was left open in the sliding door, he could see the secretary with a candle in one hand. She was also carrying a towel, so she had probably just taken a bath. Her uncouth pajama in combination with her wet hair made her look sexy.

She entered the room curiously and cowered down beside the boy. He showed her a wry smile.

"It's a diary. ...or perhaps I should call it a travelogue?"

"Is it the record of your journey?"

"Yes."

"This diary sure looks splendid, huh... is it foreign-made?"

A thick cover reinforced with brass. On top of that it even got a lock. If it weren't on a futon in a Japanese house, it would surely look exactly like a magical grimoire.

"Beats me. There was no price tag or any other label."

He cocked his head. Then he took out the key of the Super Cub, and the other key that was tied to it, and opened the seal of the book. On the page of yesterday one could see his peculiar handwriting.

"Yesterday's date... is this your writing?"

"Yes. We take turns at writing this diary, so the girl would be next today," he said with a wry smile and pointed at the soundly sleeping girl with his chin.

"Well, it seems like there is no helping it. I am sure she would get angry if we woke her up now."

"Last time I woke her up in such a situation, my punishment was a cobra twist. Next would be a roll-up I guess?"

The secretary laughed on hearing his confident answer .

"You don't have it easy either, do you?"

"But it's something I took on of my own accord. Just like you, secretary."

She evaded his nudge with a giggle.

"My, my. What an impertinent child. Rather than being pretentious, you ought to take a bath and sleep."

The secretary turned elegantly and left the room. While watching her from behind, he put his hand to his chin. Not because he was bewitched by her smooth legs . No, he was pondering over something in her words that had attracted his attention.

"...Bath....."

First he looked at the sleeping girl.

"...Bath... huh..."

Then he looked in the direction of the bath.

He didn't need to ponder very long.

The next day in the early morning by the door of the store.

The two travelers were preparing for an early departure because they wanted to go while the morning sun was still low in the horizon.

"We really can't thank you enough for your kindness," the girl bowed down and so did the boy hurriedly when he saw her doing so.

The boy had repaired the engine early in the morning and it was now humming like a kitten, making it seem as though a shaky old man had rejuvenated into a sportsman in his twenties. Judging from this, the engine was in top condition.

"We're sorry for making you even give us a breakfast after already receiving so much from you."

"No problem. It was a pleasure talking to young people once again. It is too bad that you will not stay for a little longer."

The boy smiled after seeing the secretary's cheerful smile.

"Well, but we're still on a journey."

"...I see. But feel free to visit us anytime."

"Yes. But that's going to be far in the future."

"...Come to think of it, I did not ask for your destination. Tell me, where is your journey headed?" asked the secretary.

The two of them exchanged glances and answered point-blank.

"To the end of the world!"

As expected, the secretary opened her eyes wide.

Their answer meant "heading to a place that does not exist". It meant that they did not mind never arriving at their destination. In other words, that they did not intend to ever stop their journey.

"You could use some food then, right?"

The director appeared from the glass door of the store and was carrying a giant object in his arms.

It was an unbelievably large melon with green and black stripes on its brilliant surface.

"Oh, well, maybe it's too watery to fill your stomaches, but I can guarantee this melon will taste terrific! I chose one that's going to be ripe in a few days because eating it right away would be no fun."

"Are you serious?! ...this is awesome... just... how do we get it on the bike?"

The boy accepted the melon hesitatingly, but realized that it was as heavy as he had predicted. Not so heavy

that it would be comparable to his own weight, but still not something to carry around easily.

"Can't you just use a net?", the girl suggested and took out a net from the bundle for their sleeping equipment, which they used to use as a hammock. Wobbly on his legs, the boy put the heavy melon down next to the bike.

"No, what I mean is where do we put it? The pillion is already occupied by you, the front is full, too, and the side bag may still be empty, but think about the balance... "

"All right, I'll go get another melon for balance!"

The secretary slammed the director with her elbow when he made this suggestion. *Geez, in contrast to such a high position, he never learns.*

"But surely... we could hold the balance with some water on the opposite site..."

While the boy cut off the engine and started taking off their luggage, trying out some things, the secretary secretly approached the girl.

Slightly away from the director, who was assisting the boy, their talk among women began.

"...Listen up, girl. Men are like wolves, so mark my words!"

"A... ahahaha... I'll bear that in mind."

She had been told the same thing several times already since their decision to depart.

"First, never sleep in the same bed as him whatever may happen! There is a saying that teaches you not to sleep with boys after reaching the age of seven!"

"I wouldn't dream of it!"

The mouth of the girl was quickly covered.

The secretary evaded the suspicious glance of the director and put her arm around the girl.

"...furthermore, be careful not to fall asleep before him! "

"You sound like a veteran housewife," the girl countered annoyed.

The secretary grasped her shoulders.

"And girl! Should you ever fall in love with each other and have *you-know-what*, ALWAYS USE A RUBBER!"

"Shut UP!!"

The girl thrust her away with a vengeance and the secretary landed hard on her back.

The boy, who had stolen some glances on them, cocked his head.

"They're being pretty noisy right now. Are our girls having some problem?"

"Better not mind them. They are a kind that will remain a riddle to us men for all eternity."

"Somehow it sounds extremely persuasive and unpersuasive at the same time when you say that, director..."

"Well, that's the difference in our life experience."

A grapple fight between the two females was just about to start in front of their eyes.

Since he was worried about the girl, the boy would have actually wanted to stop them, but as history has proven, the chances of success for interfering in a quarrel between women as a man are hopeless. At best, he would get roared at by both of them and be chased away. For sure.

Anyway, while praying for a peaceful draw between them, he somehow managed to succeed in getting the melon on the Super Cub.

He turned around to the loudly arguing girls.

"I'm done with the preparations! I somehow arranged our stuff so that the water keeps the balance."

Upon hearing him out, the girl instantly changed her attitude and rushed to him.

"Shall we depart then?"

"Okay... but are you all right?"

The boy took out a handkerchief and wiped her sweat. It was too early to be sweat-soaked - they were going to drive their motorbike under the blazing sun.

While the girl was loosening her necktie due to the heat, the boy put a half-helmet on her head and turned to their hosts.

"Alright, we're off then."

He gave them a nod and approached the bike.

"If you've had enough of the journey, feel free to visit us! Just in case, the strawberries will be ripe in May!"

"Roge~r!"

He kicked up the kickstand and got on the saddle, making the loose suspension of the Super Cub sink down deeply.

After that, the girl took a seat on the pillion, so the height of their bike was quite a bit lower than usual.

"Will Cubby really be fine like this? It's not going to break in two, right?"

"Who knows...? No, I'm sure there's no prob!"

It was not clear whether he sneered spiritedly or sighed distressedly, but the sound of the engine after turning the key wiped such worries away in an instant.

The boy couldn't suppress a smile when he felt the slight but powerful vibration of the single cylinder.

"...it won't get broken again underway, I trust?"

"Don't worry! OK, let's get going."

"Mhm. Got it."

She fastened the chin strap and held onto his waist.

The boy checked on her with a brief glance and looked ahead again.

"Let's GO!"

He opened the throttle wide and drove away.

At first the bike drove zig-zag due to the heavy luggage and passengers, but this settled quickly as they gained speed. The director and secretary, who were waving their hands, became smaller and smaller and eventually disappeared because of the rise and fall of the road.

While smoothly accelerating, they could at last drive their little motorbike again on this lonely road in the meadows.

It was seven in the morning and still summer. Bathing in the blazing light of the as usual brightly shining sun, another day of chasing after "escaping water" was about to start.

Interlude

"...Boy?"

The girl raised her voice a while after they had departed.

"Mhm?"

"...the director mentioned that the strawberries will be ripe in May next year, right?"

"...Yeah."

"Do you think he will last until then?"

"...I don't know. But indeed. What will happen first? His 'disappearance' or the strawberry harvest?"

"..."

There was silence between them for a while. The girl held tightly onto him.

Hang in there, secretary. Hang in there!

The wind of the Super Cub carried her voice away and , maybe without reaching anyone, disappeared in the summery asphalt.

The Super Cub's several-horsepower engine kept running just fine even after the store of the director had disappeared below the horizon. The scenery that unfolded on both sides wasn't very different from what they had walked past the day before, but this time it was rather refreshing thanks to their speed. The sunlight still had a death-ray quality, but the fresh breeze eased it greatly.

"...by the way. Boy?"

The girl suddenly addressed him. With a cold voice at that.

"Yes. How may I help you, madam?"

"Could you tell me why I can smell the soft fragrance of soap from your body?"

The boy grew pale in an instant.

"Don't you think this is strange...? I mean, '*I*' didn't have the occasion to take a bath. Why oh why?"

"...last night... after you fell asleep... I m-mean, you'd have gotten angry if I woke you up.....ugh?!"

The girl wrapped her fingers around his neck.

"I see. Do you have anything left to say?"

"W-Wait a-"

She squeezed.

"Ungh!

"You wicked DEVIL!! Do you know when I had my last bath?! It's been more than A WEEK!! Can you imagine this agony?! Oh feel the distress of a girl that couldn't wash her hair for over a week!!"

Even while the remainder of the boy's life was slowly drained by her firm grip on his neck, the silver Super Cub continued its way on the dead straight road with a powerful sound.

Wings

The boy looked up at the heavy, dark clouds in the sky .

Only some moments ago, it had still been a clear blue sky, but then clouds slowly caught up from behind and the sky turned overcast. The speed with which this happened could be called lightning-fast and the blue color that was there before was beyond imagination now, so that one couldn't even tell where the sun was anymore .

Unaffected by this, the green surrounding them hadn't changed. From time to time they came by some farms that had been crushed by the snowfall last winter, but none of those could serve them as a rain shelter.

"...oh well. Looks like there's going to be a shower. I just hope we're out of here by then..."

"Don't worry! People always told me that I'm beloved by the sun."

"Too bad. *I* was always called the 'rain bringer'. Guess why."

"Uh-oh-"

The girl giggled while turning around. The clouds that had been gradually getting thicker as time went by looked as though they would start pouring their contents over them any moment.

What's so bad about getting a little wet, some may wonder. But that is a sentiment limited to those who have hot coffee and a dry towel waiting for them at home .

They required fuel to warm themselves up, they had to light their fires on their own and they had to dry their wet clothes immediately. They would be in big trouble should they catch a cold. Even if it didn't lead to the worst case scenario, the two run the risk of starving to death if they are forced to stay at one place for several days.

"If things don't change, we're both going to catch colds. Who would be the carer in that case?"

"Usually I think it's those who don't have enough power left to care for someone else that are cared for."

"It's a duel over who'll recover first, then!"

"I wonder... according to my personal prediction, you'll win that duel, but I'll be the one who laughs last."

"...what do you mean by that?"

"Well, I can already see how you'll fall sick again after overhastily claiming the victory by reporting that you've 'recovered'. Without any foundation, of course."

"....."

He had hit the bull's eye. The girl used to be stubborn and overhasty from time to time. Indeed, the situation he described was definitely possible.

"And then I'll eat the melon all on my own! After all, it would hurt your stomach, wouldn't it?"

"You won't! We're eating that melon only after splitting it in a grand pinata contest! Got me?!"

The large melon they had received from the director was, just as he had estimated, almost ripe, giving off a nice sound when knocking on it. While the boy was simply waiting for the ideal time to eat it, the girl had apparently already decided *how* to eat the melon. The

execution of a melon-splitting event had been scheduled - without taking his opinion into consideration.

"I admit your plan sounds great to me... but you do realize that we don't have a bat?"

"Uhm... then how about this?" said the girl, kicking Cubby's muffler briefly.

"Don't even think about it! It's going to break if you do that."

Well, actually, Cubby wouldn't break just from having its muffler removed, but he willfully kept silent about that. For one thing, he had not the least inclination to hit the road with the roaring sound of a biker gang, and for another thing, destroying his dear vehicle, the Super Cub , just for a melon after finally getting it repaired some days ago seemed way too cruel to him.

"Mh, can't be helped. In that case we'll just have to look out for a fitting bat somewhere on the ground."

"There's no need to insist on splitting it with a bat, though. I mean, it's not like we couldn't cut it somehow with a knife."

However, his idea had no chance of being adopted to begin with. The preparation of the melon had already been set to splitting it with a bat in her head. And he had no right to make any changes to this.

"Ah, a place where there is water would be great, too. I want to eat it cold."

The girl, who had (as expected) completely ignored his opinion, patted the melon on the backside rack.

The boy fully agreed with her that such a large melon would develop its true deliciousness only when solemnly split. It would be a waste to make it just a dessert. In regards to this, both of them were of the same mind.

It's just that the boy couldn't be as optimistic as the girl was.

Leaving aside the bat, it seemed improbable to him that they would find a place with cold water so easily. Of course, a streamlet would do the job, but one had to consider the current look of the sky. It was way too dangerous to be around a river.

He didn't tell her, though, as he didn't see the need to dampen her spirits.

Thereafter, the two travelers and their Super Cub just kept moving on for a while, driving past the occasionally appearing intersections at full speed without paying the least attention to the traffic lights.

The reason for this was the weather, of course. It kept getting worse, making the clouds even thicker than they had been before: even though it was just past noon, it was already as dark as in the evening, and once in a while they would even spot a thunderbolt flashing up from between the clouds, which looked like tightly compressed dust balls. From that they could easily judge that there wasn't much time left til the thunder-storm.

Then, when it became past four. Far ahead of the unchanging, dead-straight road, they discovered something.

"What's that? Doesn't that look like a warehouse or something?"

"No idea... I can't tell from this distance."

Somewhere ahead of their road, which cut through green scenery, there was an unpaved branch road that

diverged at a right angle. And further ahead, he could see something like a warehouse made of galvanized sheet iron that was completely corroded by rust.

With his naked eye, naturally he could not see as much as the girl who had binoculars, but what they saw should have been about the same from such a distance.

Also, being able to see something with just his eyes meant that it would only take a few minutes to arrive there on Cubby's wheels. Since there weren't any other junctions until there anyway, they decided to approach the building for the time being.

A few minutes later.

Along with a protesting cry from Cubby's brakes, they came to a halt and had their heavy load make the front suspension sink in deeply. From the engine fumed a steam-like heat, which could probably be attributed to the boy stepping on the gas.

The warehouse in question was in much better shape than they had expected from a distance; it was indeed consumed by rust, but there were no holes to be seen in the walls and roof.

The girl got off the tandem and the boy parked the Super Cub under a roof that was situated at an unloading area.

It had yet to rain, so they had somehow managed not to look like drowned rats.

"Whew, thank God we made it in time," said the girl relievedly.

"Yeah. It's not raining yet, but I suppose we're going to be fine here."

He looked up at the warehouse behind him.

The sheet iron building, which stood solely and surrounded by endless green, wasn't actually that big. In terms of size and shape it was comparable with a small sports hall.

At the front was a metal sliding door through which quite large objects could be transported, but like the building itself it was corroded by rust. From the looks of it, this place hadn't been maintained very frequently. It would have been to be expected that there was at least a sign of the responsible company or something, but since there wasn't even something of that kind, it seemed like this storehouse was not in use at the moment.

After he had shut down the engine and taken off his helmet, a large truck beside the warehouse caught his eye.

In contrast to the from-top-to-bottom dilapidated storehouse that seemed about to crumble to iron-oxidic powder any second now, the truck was loaded with a shining silver container and parked alongside the building. It was clearly too new to suit this place and was hidden from the road under an overhanging roof.

"...There's a truck. Looks like we may be able to get hold of some fuel."

"Why don't you just take the whole truck? A journey with air-conditioning is waiting for us!"

"No way. Or do you think I own a truck license?" said the boy with a wry smile and putting down the kickstand after moving the motorcycle a little more towards the storehouse, so that it wouldn't get hit by the rain. Of course he didn't forget to carefully check the balance because of their delicate luggage.

"Who cares about a license? We haven't happened upon one uniformed officer, not even a police car, during our journey. Besides, neither of us has a motorcycle license and we're still riding a Super Cub."

"What I mean is that I have no clue how to drive it! That thing's not like a moped where you can help yourself by deriving from your experience with bicycles. How do you expect me to drive a 4-tonner truck when I haven't even sneaked a peek at the driver's seat of one in my life?"

"Then have somebody who knows teach you," said she a little dauntedly.

The boy shrugged, "Sure, when there is somebody like that."

"There is!" she declared, which got him eying her. A demand for foundation was writ large in his face.

"For one thing, footprints. Look," said the girl, pointing at the tracks at her feet. Dry footprints that looked different from their sneakers' were scattered all over the ground.

"Judging from the size, it's a man. He seems to be wearing sports shoes, so he may even be about our age. Taking the level of dryness into consideration, I would assume these footprints were made during the rain about two weeks ago."

"...In short, someone has been here recently and might still be?"

"Exactly! How's that? That's what I call 'reasoning'."

She gave herself airs, putting her hands on her hips, whereas the boy just breathed out a sigh.

"...If he were as old as us, he couldn't possibly know how to drive a truck, could he?"

"..."

The girl froze in the posture she had taken.

"Either way, if these footprints belong to a grown-up with that knowledge, do you think he would readily leave the truck to us?"

She was at a complete loss for words.

Even the girl was aware of how fatal it would be to lose one's vehicle in the middle of this savage --- no, I mean "vast" land.

Of course she was! There was no way of forgetting the trouble they'd had with Cubby's engine some days ago.

"Well, if we're lucky we can at least get some fuel from him. But I suppose trucks of this kind are diesel, so is there even gas?"

"....."

Her mouth was still closed. Apparently, she wasn't too happy about her conclusion being spoiled.

He turned away from his sullen partner and opened his mouth loudly.

"Hellooooo? Is there anyone there?"

There was no answer. Still, the walls were made of sheet metal, so his voice should have passed through them.

"Shall we just enter the warehouse for now, before it starts to rain? Besides, we may find a rod of some sort which we can use for splitting the melon."

A high creak resounded as the blockade of the metal door was broken.

They went for the large entrance that was designed to transport things through it. It was a pain to open the door with his bare hands, but the ordinary entrance on the side was sealed with wire wrapped around the knob and the rear entrance was locked. Consequently, this was

the only way inside. Of course they could just have broken a window and entered from there, but they decided against it, since that was going too far.

They didn't know whether that sealed door was the deed of "the inhabitant", but judging from the red rust all over the wire, it hadn't been opened for months.

The same, however, applied to the sliding door. This became evident when rust started falling down from the top rail while it was being opened by the boy's frantic use of both his hands and feet.

Hence, it didn't seem to be used much either. The owner must have been using the rear entrance.

"Heere... we go...!"

Along with a noise, red rust rained down on his head.

He somehow succeeded in opening the door by squashing his shoulder and legs in between. It seems like using force can go well, too, once in a while.

"Well well... Hellooo? Is there anyone?"

The girl hopped into the warehouse without even trying to understand the hardships he had just gone through. Concerning him, he was stretching his legs on the ground and breathing exhaustedly. The icing on the cake was the rust that was all over him.

From what they could see, there were no leaks through which the rain could enter and it seemed stable enough to withstand the storm. The temperature was rather cool, too, making it "comfortable" overall - if you ignored the rest of it! However, due to the horrible moldy stench and the dark and gloomy air, they could not call it " comfortable" at all.

From outside, it had seemed like a simple barracks of sheeted metal, but this was not exactly the case. While the ground really was left bare, heat insulating material had been used for the ceiling and there were also fluorescent lamps, though turned off. There was even some weak air-conditioning for work purposes.

At any rate, it was a thousand times better than camping outside. Hence, they set this warehouse as the day's camping ground.

While dusting the rust stuck to his hands, the boy took a look around.

"This building isn't used as a warehouse, as it seems."

"What do you mean?"

While untying her hair - she used a hair tie because her hair would get in the way otherwise - she turned towards the boy.

"Can you see any commodities? Even just traces? All that's here is this..."

What he was talking of were the rather unfamiliar things that could be seen there. For one thing there were hand-made metal holding devices. On some desks, workbenches apparently, there were tools, much much better than the ones in his own possession, and various strangely-shaped utensils and measuring instruments.

As a whole, they looked as though they served one certain purpose.

Right, it was like...

"...A garage?"

"Yeah. I think those tools are for maintaining or assembling something."

All of the tools were directed towards the holding devices installed in the center and seemed to cohere. He didn't know what was supposed to be fixated on those stands, but he sensed that this place must have been for a lot of people to work on one thing.

"Who's there?"

The two were startled by a sudden voice and hurriedly turned their gazes towards the other end of the warehouse, just to have their hearts miss a beat yet again.

"Tz...! How dare you open the door and nestle in here, damn couple... What are you doing in my house?"

He was about mid-twenties. His clothing consisted of simple slacks and a T-shirt, and while his body couldn't quite be called an Adonis body, it was one of a sportsman.

Just.

Just, what shocked them more than anything was his face.

Pure white it was. The decolorization the director had suffered stood no comparison with it. What could be seen of his skin was completely white as if he was part of a black-and-white photograph.

No, since there was shadowing, pure white might not be fully correct. He lacked color so much that it seemed as if he had been cut out and replaced by monochrome film.

"What? Is a visage like mine that unusual?"

"...Quite so. It is the first time I've seen someone that has progressed this far..."

"I'm no attraction. Get lost if there's nothing you want from me."

"Oh, actually there is. It looks like it's going to rain and our motorcycle will not get us far. Please let us spend only a night here. Furthermore, may we borrow a rod or something that is suitable for splitting a melon?"

The man raised an eyebrow.

"......A rod?"

"Yes. We have received an extra-large melon from a kind person whom we met on our way, but we had trouble finding a tool to cut it with. So why not use the opportunity and have some fun splitting it, we thought. However, we lacked an appropriate rod in our luggage," told the girl fluently with a perfect ingratiating smile and for a few moments the man just kept suspiciously gazing at her.

"...Help yourself and use what you want. But hands off the stuff I'm using!" said he, when he had finally given up, and left them, going towards a cot that was installed at the back of the room. Apparently, he used a corner of the warehouse, which he had divided from the rest, as some sort of nap area.

The girl breathed out lightly and turned around.

"Heard him, boy? Let's accept his good will and go searching for a rod as part of a nice break."

"Y-Yeah..."

He joined the search with a light dread of her forcing smile that would not let him refuse.

After all, one ought not to defy her at the wrong time.

For starters, the two went to a line of racks, which were stocked with tools and stuff, and started looking for a tool that fit their needs.

"Boy? How about this?"

"You intend to split a melon with a spanner? ...well, leaving aside the idea, that length won't work. Too short. "

"How's this then?"

"A hammer, huh... it'll turn into mush!"

"Mmmhh... then it must be this."

"What on earth do you plan on doing with that wire stripper?"

The boy was a little stunned at the girl who randomly showed him what was in reach.

But he noticed that the tools here, too, were a little strange.

There were all kinds and sorts of them, but they all were rather small. He thought he could find bolts and nuts in many different diameters, but even the largest sized were much smaller than the usual standard.

The man had sat down on a pipe chair and was watching them through his dull eyes as they bustled about searching.

"...hmph. A trip as a couple, not giving a shit about school? You kids must be full of yourselves, huh?"

The girl did not overhear the mumbling voice behind her.

Without stopping her fumbling hands, she ventured a counterattack with a small voice.

"Oh? I think that's still a good deal better than being a drunkard who's legless already in the daytime."

The air tensioned. He had heard her for certain.

"......as if a little brat like you could understand me..."

"Oh, but I believe I can understand part of a tiny little bit of you!"

She swiftly stood up and turned towards him - and threw something so fast it couldn't be followed by the naked eye.

The object that landed before his feet with its pages fluttering open was without a doubt her student notebook, which she always carried around with her.

"Take a good look at that student card."

"......what's the point..."

The man picked it up grudgingly but frowned when he saw the open page - as though he was looking at something that made no sense.

Her photograph that was attached to the student card had already faded so much that one could hardly tell whether there was anything at all.

Her name and student number had been lost entirely, which indicated that quite some time had passed since she started "vanishing".

The man widened his eyes slightly.

"My symptoms haven't progressed as much as yours, but before long they will! Well, it's just a matter of sooner or later if you ask me?" she boasted for some reason, which made him give her a slightly queer look, though he averted his eyes immediately afterwards.

"...hmph. It really is just a tiny bit..."

"Wha...!"

To stop her from countering, he tossed her the student card and turned from them.

".....You'd better eat that melon quickly and get out of here."

Leaving behind only these words, he stood up, pulled the shroud and disrupted their field of vision.

Their search proved to be much harder than they had expected; the clock showed seven in the evening when they left the warehouse because they had given up searching inside.

It was still not raining, but since there was no sunlight, it was so dark outside that one couldn't do without a flashlight.

"Man!! What an insolent old drunkard!"

"Isn't calling him an 'old drunkard' a little cruel if you consider his age?"

"What? You're on the side of that old drunkard?"

The boy smiled wryly, watching her kick one of the H-shaped posts of the warehouse to vent her irritation.

"Say what you want, but... we're having him help us out by lending us a rod after all."

"And there's no sign of that rod! That's why I told you to pull that thing off and use that."

"But that 'thing' is the drainage pipe of the air conditioner. He's going to be troubled if we just pull that off!"

"Why should we care?"

"We should!" laughed the boy,taking two flashlights out of the bag attached to the Super Cub. One of them he handed over to her.

"How's our watermelon doing?" he muttered and tapped the watermelon with a finger, making a dull, well-sounding sound. It was just the right ripeness. It could be said without a doubt that today and tomorrow were the best days to eat it. Otherwise it would get overripe. If they didn't find anything by then, they would have to split it with their hands.

Suddenly the boy recalled the truck that was parked by the warehouse.

He paused to think for a moment and pulled up the zipper of the bag.

"So in the end, what should we do now?"

"Mh... how about taking a look in that truck?"

"Truck? Aah, that one outside?"

"Probably, it's still loaded with things," stated he - seeming quite sure, to the amazement of the girl who followed him while cocking her head.

After they had headed to the truck and had closed the rusted metal door, the partitioning of the nap corner moved slightly.

As it was clearly too dark, the boy turned on his flashlight.

Looked at from far away it had just given him the impression of a normal truck, but it was larger than expected when they got closer.

The shining silver container looked quite unnatural compared to the deterioration of the warehouse. Another

sign that the truck hadn't been in actual use around here here was that its tires weren't very dirty.

"Looks like it's a rental truck. See the mark on the license plate?" the girl pointed out. (TN: most rental cars in Japan have a わ-car-number)

"Mh, did that man rent it? I wonder why."

"Well, for transporting something. Most likely. But the rental period has expired if you ask me. He's a criminal."

They examined it briefly, walking around the vehicle, and found out that at least the container was not locked.

While they didn't know what was inside, they could hazard a guess. After all, this was a loaded rental truck parked beside a warehouse designated to put something together.

"...So... in here is what belongs inside the warehouse?"

"I think so. If it's not in the warehouse, it must be in here," explained he and grabbed the door handle casually .

He jumped on the step and pulled the handle as hard as he could, whereupon the double doors opened along with a small creak.

The boy almost fell down because he had used too much power, but somehow he managed to keep his balance by grabbing the door bar.

".....huh? What is this?"

"...this must be..."

The boy was bereft of speech. Strictly speaking not because it ran afoul of his expectations, but rather because what he saw there exceeded them.

The two ascended the container as if they were allured in.

The cold light of his flashlight shone into the container and was reflected by translucent film on a long board. Although the volume of the frame, which was made of a

snow white material, was extremely small, its length filled out the entire space of the container of a 4-tonner truck.

In the harmonic play of darkness and light, the very precisely-made yet simple film and those artistic curves looked graceful.

"......don't touch that."

They immediately turned around and spotted the man from earlier.

The girl was a little disappointed because she had been wary of another rant from him like when they first met. She hopped down off the load-carrying platform, but for some reason the boy remained there.

The man turned straight towards him and darted him a drunk and shady glance.

"...you know what that is?"

"Yes. It's a human-powered aircraft. One for long distances at that," he answered promptly, making the man shut his mouth.

Right. That board-like, extremely long object was the main wing of an HPA. The transparency was the result of a thin polymer film that was affixed to its framework in order to decrease the weight.

The frame was supposed to be black since FRP is employed, but this one was white.

"...right. It was supposed to challenge the figure-eight flight at the Straits of Dover."

"That's amazing!"

The boy turned again towards the interior.

An ordinary human-powered aircraft is said to have a total width of around 30 meters, but of these wings only one was already next to 20 meters. It was no doubt a large long-distance plane.

"...So the warehouse was used to put this together...," said the girl and breathed out, now that it had finally sunk in, before she walked away from the truck. Something, however, seemed to bother her, so she stopped. "...Uh? Why would you put it together at such a remote place? You can't be planning to fly all the way from Japan to England, right?"

"For a test flight. The Strait of Dover is situated between the frontiers of England and France, so it's a pain just to get a flight permission. I'm not so stupid as to go for the main event straight away," he answered while scratching his head listlessly.

"...Why on earth is it still in parts then?"

"...that's because all my colleagues vanished the very day we hauled it here," he whispered, leaving her speechless. "Halfway through the project, it broke out in all the members. Almost every one of us quit his job, since most had one, and continued to work on the project while living off retirement money. Well, but in the end we only barely managed to get the parts done...," he answered indifferently, whereas the girl had averted her eyes unconsciously. "I'm the last one who caught it and the final one left. And even I have gone this low... Hey, brat. Won't you get out of there now?"

The boy, however, showed no sign of alighting.

"...won't you fly it?"

Almost like looking down on him, he looked down at the man from the platform.

"It's not 'I won't', it's 'I can't'. There's no way I could put this together alone. To begin with, that's none of your business."

The boy let out a rather stressed sigh and,

"Alright, then let's take this apart and use it for our watermelon."

He proposed something outrageous.

"Hah?!"

The first one to doubt his sanity along with an outcry was the girl.

"Were you even listening to what he just said?! Boy! This is a valuable aircraft! Arisen from the collaborative work of that drunkard and his colleagues, you know?!"

"But isn't it mere trash if nobody's going to fly it?"

The girl could virtually feel the wrath burning in the man by her side. She gulped and took a step back.

"Brat... do you even know how many hardships we went through to construct this...!"

"I don't! But I can guess. Making something amazing like this without any sponsors must have been unbelievably difficult."

"Then don't..."

The boy cut him short: "But you're not going to fly it, are you? You told us yourself that we may take anything you don't use. And you don't use this, right?"

The man kept silent.

"Making junk out of it or leaving the parts there untouched is exactly the same in terms of your hardships being rendered futile! If you're going to let it rot here anyway, we'd rather make good use of it with our watermelon."

"......Don't talk nonsense!"

Surprised by his roar, the girl took another step backwards. Despite her motto being "Quarrel? Hell yeah! GOGOGO!", she was not good with provocations that were logical.

The boy might have been much better than her in getting the opponent where it hurts.

"Nonsense? Really? I think it's easily more nonsensical to let it ferment in the truck forever. We're not talking about wine, after all."

He flashed a fiendish smile whereas the man, in contrast, contorted his face.

"...then... what am I supposed to do?!"

"Well, let's see... wouldn't it be best to use it for what it was originally made for?"

"...what...?"

"Let's fly it!"

The man's jaw dropped---the girl besides him made a half-surprised, half-baffled face, too.

The provocative tone disappeared suddenly from the boy's voice and he continued smiling as if he were talking to a good friend: "You need help to put it together , right? You're not alone now! There are three in total."

The man relaxed his clenched fist and turned his gaze towards the aircraft in the container.

".....You're telling me to fly this all alone, though all my colleagues have vanished...?" he whispered.

The boy smiled wryly, "Well, of course. It's designed for only one pilot anyway. Aren't you forgetting that you yourself belong to those 'colleagues' as well?"

".....It's too late to go to Dover anymore. There's no point in flying it, you know...?"

"Mh, let's see... the speed at which the vanishment progresses varies from person to person... but you are clearly in its terminal stages. Added to that, it should be quite hard to make your way to Dover even with a good deal of luck considering the current state of things in the world."

"We have gone this far... because we wanted to break the world record of traversing Dover... flying here won't leave any record... even if it would, as soon as I vanished, the record would vanish along with me for certain..."

He seemed to be speaking to himself rather than to the boy.

"I guess so. But there's no need to abandon your plans for tomorrow just because you might die the day after tomorrow, is there? Let's do the test flight, just as planned!"

"Even though there's not going to be a main flight?"

"Yes. It's a thousand times better than to abandon it altogether."

The boy hopped down off the platform and stood beside the girl.

"...what profit do you take from it...?"

"Let's see... in return for our support, please share some of your fuel and food with us," answered the boy without thinking long - to the surprise of the man.

"...I see, you're not doing it for free."

Then, for the first time, he flashed a smile.

He merely moved his facial muscles slightly, so it was even unclear whether one could call it a smile, but it was the first one they saw of him since they had met.

"Looks like you just got us some hard work *without my consent*, huh?"

"I'm so—... I'm sorry!"

He had prepared himself for some pokes in the side, but that turned out to be a complete underestimation. The girl slid her right arm under his and pressed hard against his ribs.

"Now listen up. Unlike you, airplanes aren't a hobby of mine, hence I do not know how to put those things together. Understand?"

"W-Well, I don't know eithe...
OUCHOUCHOUCHOUCH!!"

"I'm not saying that I'm not interested, you know?"

The boy was at once released from the infernal agonies . While he was falling into a fit of coughing, she whispered next to him with a smile, "Now that's something... an airplane..."

The two of them went to their bike and started to prepare the things they would need for cooking and sleeping. Since they had used up a lot of time searching for a rod, they were a little late.

Fortunately, the roaring thunderstorm had removed itself a bit and it wasn't raining just now. The noisy chorus of the insects that lurked in the meadows around the warehouse had apparently been called off tonight; they all held their breath.

"You had me quite surprised there, girl. So you are interested in airplanes?"

"Well, as much as others. I've only been on one once before, when I went on a trip."

"The school excursion?"

"Nah. A family trip. To a southern island."

"I see... how was it?"

It wasn't clear whether he asked for her impressions of the southern paradise or the flight, but the girl considered he meant the latter.

"Oh well... I couldn't even see the outside because I was seated right in the middle row! On top of that, there were passengers who were frightened of flying. You can imagine what a commotion it was."

"Aah... tough luck. Too bad for the opportunity."

"Yeah, exactly. I don't want to sound rude, but thanks to one passenger who wouldn't stop screaming, I was rather composed throughout the flight!" she said with a lopsided smile and pulled out a rolled-up blanket.

"Though I feel kind of sorry for that person for having to fly in spite of his fears."

"True."

A smile escaped her lips when she unintentionally recalled the now faint yet comical scene of that day.

I wonder...

Are there still people on that island?

Are the cheerful people and the gorgeous casino girls still safe and sound?

"Sorry for disturbing while you're rapt in thought, but you won't even get around to worrying about aviophobia when you board that plane."

They spun around upon hearing a voice behind them.

"After all, one produces the kinetic energy themselves. If you don't pedal for your life before shitting your pants, you'll really crash."

It took them a few seconds to realize that it was the man from earlier.

His wildly grown beard was cleanly shaven and the outworn T-shirt had been replaced by a new one. Even

his haircut, which was short to begin with, looked neat now that he had apparently combed it.

To them he looked at least four or five years younger than before. Now he may actually be worthy of the title " Aniki".

"Oh, you're more handsome than I thought."

"...I'm not so bold as to get on our plane looking that shabby, you know."

"Handsome" was actually referring to his natural features, but the man had apparently taken it as a comment on his well-groomed appearance. Well, but nobody wants to say a compliment twice. All the more if one means it.

The girl deliberately didn't say anything, pulling out the boy's share of blankets and tucking all of them under her arm.

"So, what's the matter?" asked the boy. With a smile, of course, showing nothing of the biting attitude he had taken earlier.

The man, however, was rather flustered by that smile and averted his eyes while scratching his head. "...while the contract's only for a test flight, you have still become members of the team. It would be a bother if you caught a cold by sleeping on the bare ground. There are some cots inside, use those."

They grasped the meaning of his whisper as slowly as a fluorescent lamp would come on.

"Eh, for real?! But there's still one left for you, I hope, boss?!"

"Boss?" he wrinkled his brow a little upon seeing the bursting joy of the girl.

"You said we're a team, right? There's only one way to call the leader of a team!"

"No, I think that's just your prejudice..."

However, the boy's opinion was scrapped.

"'Boss' is fine. We have to decide on some name anyway."

"Then at least take something like 'chief' or 'leader'..."

"No. Sounds too intellectual."

She basically claimed that he did not look intelligent.

In the end, all other opinions were ignored and the man's nickname was more-or-less forcefully set to "boss". In this respect, she didn't have the right to criticize the boy for arbitrarily choosing their travel route. Which he did not say of course. The boy was smart.

"...Aah, and you can do some light cooking. There's a small kitchen in the annex."

"Alright, boy! Leave dinner to me!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yup. Prepare our beds in the meantime!"

The strangely energetic girl chucked the blankets to him and sped to the back of the warehouse.

She was probably just delighted with the opportunity to sleep in a real bed again. And if he was honest, he shared her view.

"...Say..."

The boy turned around. Boss, still looking in the direction the girl disappeared, continued, "Since she suffers from «it», I guess you do, too?"

"Yes. Still in the initial stages, but my name has already been «lost». I guess my photograph is going to become unidentifiable, too, in the near future," he said unaffectedly.

It took a while until he got a reply.

"...What do you want? For what reason did you come here to the back of beyond?"

His question was drowned out by the sounds of the night making small ripples in the meadows around them, veiled in darkness.

".....I want to travel to the end of the world, together with her."

It sounded like a pipe dream indeed. However, what he said was by no means out of place and, above all, he was serious.

"...What are you going to do if you reach there?"

"I'll figure that out on the way! ...But well, perhaps I'll go on a round-the-world trip or so and demonstrate the excellency of Super Cubs to the world?"

"Sounds like fun."

A wry smile escaped his lips, which was not a sardonic one, but an honest one. The boy's confidence was clearly unfounded, but it brimmed with a strong will.

It did not matter whether it was feasible or not, for that was not the point of his dream to begin with. But the boss had the feeling that it would surely be a lot of fun, more than any game or work there was.

He had become unable to follow in suit.

However, he had his own objective.

He turned and headed again towards the warehouse.

"Okay, for today get something to eat and have some rest. We'll begin work tomorrow. We'll take half the day to put it together, so the flight will be the day after tomorrow."

"We're going to be busy, aren't we? ...Ah, right! Do you have some water here that I could use for keeping our melon cool?"

"There's a water tank that contains some purified water. Well, it isn't exactly icy water, but it'll do the job."

"That's great. ...Ah, but we didn't find a rod."

"Mh..... How about this?"

He pointed at the drainage pipe that was connected to the air conditioner at the ceiling—the pipe, which the girl had suggested to use earlier. However.

"Won't the cooling get broken if we take that off?"

"Hah? The only current we have comes from the dynamo! Only an idiot would turn on air conditioning. What a waste," he spilled, put one foot on the wall and tore out the pipe at once.

A few corroded screws flew off with a small creak, and the next moment a metal pipe was laid into the boy's hands. It was a bit longer than a meter, which was a truly ideal length.

"...somehow I have mixed feelings about this..."

His monologue remained unheard.

Surrounding the fire they had made from scrap wood in the center of the warehouse, the three opened a meeting while taking a meal. Unfortunately, their boss' provisions may have differed in quantity from their own, but certainly not in quality: today's menu was canned hardtacks.

"Tch. That's what you meant by 'provisions'? I was already expecting a delicious dinner..."

"It's not like this is all I have, but the other stuff is still packaged. 'Would take a while to dig all the stuff out."

"Where did you get these hardtacks from, then?"

The cans were imprinted with English text and the corresponding Japanese translation. Moreover, it was marked as UN supply.

"The towns in these quarters were already deserted before we came here. Well, while getting here, we paid them a short visit, if you know what I mean," he explained, making quotation marks with his fingers.

His personality just became a little more questionable.

"What's wrong?" boss asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Ah, nothing, never mind."

They smiled wryly at him and continued their meal.

Shoplifting was a crime of course, but they didn't have the right to blame him for it. Breaking into forlorn shops to collect the abandoned goods had become an everyday occurrence, for one could not survive in this world otherwise.

"By the way, what work does putting the plane together incorporate, specifically?" asked the girl, upon which their boss set his can aside.

"...Let's see... First we have to assemble the main components. Then comes the bonding of the movable parts as well as their regulation. Finally, we'll do a test drive and naturally the test flight. We should be fine since we have the manual, but it will take the whole next day."

"Do we need any special skills?"

"Not for the assembling stage in general. But there are some things that require experience, so you'll mainly take care of the odd jobs."

"Can I get on it, too?"

"No. It's my plane," he refused her request almost like a child, which caused the girl to puff her cheeks.

"Miser. Then give us your truck!"

"Can't do that either."

"Why not?"

"There's no fuel because I wasn't able to refill the tank in the nearby village. Apart from that, I've used quite a lot of fuel for small things such as making fires, so you'd run out of gas before reaching the next town," he explained casually.

"Y-You idiot!" she roared, "What happened to our enjoyable trip—roof, sleeping place and air conditioning included?! We have even less reason to help you now!"

"I for one like our Super Cub..."

"Boy, SHUT UP!"

The boy, who had even lost his right to speak at last, was forced to focus on his meal—which, however, was easier said than done. Their boss and the girl were busy stealing the can from each other.

"I will keep my promise of giving you fuel! There's still plenty of gasoline from the dynamo. At the very least, you should reach the next town."

"What about provisions?"

"There are still quite a few cans left. You can appreciate preserved food more, right?"

"Hm... it's a fair trade then, then...?"

The boy suddenly stood up.

"Oh, where are you going?"

"I don't want to expose our luggage to the rain, so I'm bringing it inside. I'll also do a check, since we've been quite hard on Cubby today!"

"Mh, got it. Don't get caught by the chupacabras!"

"As if they exist!"

The boy left through the half-opened door and let out a small sigh. He was relieved that the hostile air between the girl and the boss had disappeared.

He did not assume that everyone in the world was kind-hearted, but as it was impossible to meet everyone, he wanted to at least make a favorable relationship to those he actually knew.

That he had provoked boss earlier was also part of that mindset. Well, he got them a slightly cumbersome task, but they weren't in a hurry, after all.

They were going to spend the following days together, so he wanted to get on as well as possible.

At least he thought so at this very moment. However, when he came back approximately 20 minutes later, after doing some light maintenance, he was a little cross with them.

"Oh come on! Just the two of you...?"

"Haah...? Now, now, why so tense booy?"

She suddenly wrapped her arm round his neck, which he hurriedly shook off. The girl tended to forget restraining herself when alcoholized.

"Where on earth did he shelve this...?"

"He said they bought a whooole lot for celebrating the success of the test! The stuff's already expired... but it's still good, you know~?"

"Listen, girl. We're still in high school, you know? Alcohol is..."

"There's no high schooler that gives a shit about such an ooold law nowadaays~" the girl laughed with her tanned skin flushed bright red.

The empty beer and shochu cans that were scattered around those two were proof that a grand feast had been had during the twenty minutes the boy was away maintaining their bike.

"But look, excessive alcohol consumption during the growth period has a negative influence on your growth... "

"I'm already sixteeen, you know? No way I'm still growing!"

The girl chuckled while clinging to his back.

She indeed had a point there, but judging by the feeling on his back, some parts of her body could still need some growth. The boy was smart, however, so by no means did he say it. He loved life too much.

As a footnote: the boy was a nondrinker to the core. So much so that his skin turned bright red in plaster shape when an alcohol-drenched patch was applied to him during a test in junior high.

As for boss, who was most definitely the patron of the alcohol, he was wordlessly drinking beer. Though his face looked serious as he stared into the air, it was obvious that he was drunk because he was red all over. He was probably the type of person that would get silent when drunk.

"It's been a while since we last had some alcohol... and we don't know when's the next opportunity~..."

The boy gave up persuading the giggling girl.

He judged that it would be better not to care about them any more. Since nobody has made him join in the drinking, yet, the damage was still low.

The boy decided to quickly evacuate to the nap area where he would write the diary and then go to sleep.

"Nap area" may sound nice, but in fact it was just a corner in the warehouse that was divided with a

partition and consisted of five cots. But to the boy and girl, who had basically always slept on top of some blankets on the asphalt, it was a heavenly place to sleep.

He lay on the bed and covered himself with a blanket so as to not get a stomachache. He was soon attacked by sleepiness while writing the diary entry.

Before long, the only voice still speaking, the girl's, slowly faded out and the boy fell into a soft sleep.

The day dawned.

A noise of immense volume caused both the boy and girl to jump awake at the same time.

"W-What the heck?!"

The boy, utterly startled, jumped out of the nap area, pushing the partition aside, and recognized the origin of the noise.

Boss was backing the truck into the warehouse through the front door and getting ready to unload the things inside.

Outside the building it was so silent that he could hear the twittering of birds far away. Apparently, it was fine weather.

"Hey, you two! Won't you get up already! We're starting!"

"Y-Yes!"

Where did the spirit from yesterday go? He hurriedly flung on a shirt and got into his trousers while jumping with the other.

The girl who had been sleeping in the bed next to him had degenerated to the embodiment of "inviting one's own misfortunes".

Leaving aside her richly stimulating clothing, which consisted of only her underwear and a blouse, her vacant eyes were the eyes of the dead. Her whole body was enveloped in the stench of alcohol and her hair was so disordered that she could have been mistaken for a Medusa.

She had apparently continued drinking for quite a while after the boy had gone to sleep and was now cursed with deep rings under her eyes that only added to her hypotension.

"Um... well, join us as soon as you're better!"

He took a packet of headache tablets out of their portable first-aid box and put it on the knees of the girl who had partially turned into a zombie.

According to what he knew from personal experience, she would take a few hours before becoming operative again. Most likely she hadn't even heard what he had just said to her.

With a deep buzz the engine stopped on the other side of the partition.

He put his messy clothes in order and returned the partition he had tossed away to its former place. He did so not because of consideration toward the lady, but because of the menacing death penalty that would come from the suspicion of having forgotten the consideration toward the lady.

"All right, boss. What are we doing first?"

"...Cleaning up."

"Cleaning up...?"

He was about to ask how they were going to clean up something when they hadn't even started, but he was immediately enlightened when he took a look at the hall.

There was the fire they had ignited yesterday in the center of the bare ground. Well, it was already dead, since they didn't use it for keeping them warm anyway, but the problem was what lay around it.

Countless empty cans and snack packaging were scattered about. And the most crucial problem was the vomit that was to be found at several spots.

"...You didn't have to drink until vomiting..."

"I have no excuse... Sorry, but I can't remember it at all. .."

The boy joined the slouching of boss' shoulders with a sigh.

He seriously asked himself whether her brain was equipped with learning functionality upon considering the corn incident a few days ago and the current mishap.

"Oh well, leave it to me to throw away this... stuff. I've still got other preparations to do, so you clean up the interior for now."

"Got it..."

After letting out a slight breath, he headed towards the cleaning locker in a corner of the building.

"...By the way, what's with the little one over there?"

"She's idling because of a hangover and hypotension. She won't be moving for a while!"

"..."

The boss scooped up the pools with a mien brimming with mixed feelings and threw them into a bucket.

"Just regret that you carelessly served alcohol!" the boy whispered in his mind while watching him go to empty the bucket while making a face as though he was carrying a load of highly radioactive waste matter.

Well then! It was about time to start the work assigned to him, but there was something to do prior to it.

The boy, in proud spirits, cowered before their luggage and took out a pig. Indeed, it was their ceramic anti-mosquito pig!

Be it inside or outside, one must not be careless. They did not pay much heed to it while riding the bike, but with the vicinity being full of meadows there were *lots* of insects. It's a must to take measures against them when staying at a place for a while for work.

Thus, he placed the spiral-loaded anti-mosquito pig at the center of the warehouse where the fire had been and began tidying the ground.

Contrary to the boy who had cheerfully started work, the awakening of the girl was accompanied by heavy discomfort.

Her head was throbbing painfully and her stomach was bewailing heartburn.

The reason was obvious. It was probably because she had poured way too much alcohol in the previous day—or rather, that was bound to be the reason.

Overjoyed with the alcohol she hadn't seen in a while, she had accidentally let loose too much. Or to be precise, she didn't even remember having let loose, so perhaps it was the most excessive drinking she had ever done?

She now agreed that alcohol should be taken in moderation—well, originally a girl like her wouldn't be allowed to drink in the first place, though.

"...Ueh... gh..."

She instinctively covered her mouth upon feeling vomit slowly wandering up, and managed to deflect the danger by turning on her valuable blanket while stroking her stomach.

"Looks like... I went overboard quite a bit..."

She had a funny taste in her mouth and her teeth felt strangely smooth, which led her to the assumption that she had thrown up a few times. Moreover, her stomach was empty even though she had eaten and drunk late

into the night. On top of all that, her throat was rough and her voice in a sombre state.

However, the early bird gets the worm! Pulling aside the blanket, she slipped into the sneakers that were next to her cot.

That moment something landed on her foot with a weak thump.

While raising a brow, she sluggishly picked it up.

"...Headache tablets...?"

Apart from the opened, half-empty packet of headache tablets, there was a small note attached to it that said " Don't strain yourself and rest" with letters familiar to her. There was no name, but it was self-evident who the writer was.

Suddenly, she noticed a bottle of water on the small rack right beside her bed.

It was one of their two-liter bottles which they used to store drinking water. By it was an upside-down glass.

"...jeez... my fellow companion shows consideration at the strangest occasions...," she smiled crookedly and poured water into the glass.

She held the bottle against her side for a few moments to cool her body down and feel the refreshing water through the thin polymeric material.

Then, accepting the boy's favor, she took two tablets out of the packaging and threw them into her mouth. After she had gulped them down at once with some water, a cold sensation spread in her stomach.

With her sleeves she brushed away the water drops that slid down her neck and found another object on the rack in the process.

A wet towel.

"Does he want me to wipe myself? ...jeez... I know nobody that's better prepared than him...," she sighed with a combination of joy and amazement and accepted his favor once again.

Noon. The weather was clear and free of any clouds.

"Oh, you? Already recovered from your hangover?" greeted boss, who had just leaned a dustpan on a corner of the warehouse, while wiping his sweat with a towel that was draped over his shoulder.

"Yes. I can still feel it, but it's gotten a lot better."

She wasn't lying. Thanks to the mysterious effect of the headache tablets, the pain that had been tormenting her temple and forehead had almost entirely disappeared, and she was feeling quite refreshed after washing her body and putting on new underwear. While she wasn't fully functional yet, there were no worries about minor work.

"Anyway! Sorry for making you clean up the mess for me."

"No sweat, little one. There's no way to tell which of us did what anyway."

"True word."

She may have giggled, but truth to be told, she could vaguely remember that more than half of it was her fault.

"By the way, where's the boy?"

"I had him throw away the trash. He should be back any moment."

Trash probably referred to the empty cans and packages from yesterday. It seemed that her dependence on his most appreciated nursing was put on show even here.

"So, do you have any work for me?" she asked and looked down at the floor—no, bare ground.

Most of the remains of the feast the previous day were tidied away. What was still there were the ashes and bits of charcoal in the center. It didn't look like she was going to join the cleanup.

"Let's see... wanna help me with some real work?" boss grinned.

She was a little hesitant, but still she followed him and got on the step of the container of the truck.

"Okay, let's carry the parts out of there."

"Y...Yeah..."

They entered the container. Somehow the disassembled human-powered aircraft seemed much more extensive to her than the day before. She knew that type of vehicle only by hearsay. She had not the slightest idea what function each part had.

"Don't be afraid. I'm not asking you to put it together on your own."

"But...?"

"Just place the parts I give you where it's written in the manual over there. We'll save the larger parts for when the boy's back, so only the little ones for now," he said as he went further into the container.

While the aircraft loaded on the four-tonner was quite spacious, its surface wasn't particularly big. There were lots of gaps, so they could easily move within the container. In terms of weight, the plane was lighter than the girl. This stuff went beyond her scope.

"Alright. This is the first one. Can you place it on the worktable?"

He held out a component to her with a hand. No matter how inexperienced she was in mechanics, she was familiar with that kind of part. It was an axis merged with two blades—known as a "propeller".

"Got it."

The moment she actually took it, she immediately understood why he had handled the part so carelessly.

It was truly light. She was surprised—not only by it being as thin as paper, but also by the fact that she could hold it with just two fingers, even though the two blades reached a length of almost 140cm.

"Unbelievable..."

"Right? You could almost say the propeller defines how hard you have to pedal, so we put quite some work into developing it."

There was a very special something in his eyes gazing at the propeller. The girl didn't know much about him and his colleagues, but she figured that all those parts, including the extremely light-weight board, were full of their dreams and strong will.

When thinking about it like that, the propeller in her hands suddenly felt heavier than a stone.

Until she had softly placed it on the worktable, she treated the part like a baby, with utmost care—not because she wanted to be considerate of the boss, but because it was her own will to do so.

"But say, does the funny shape of it have a reason, too?"

To the understanding of the girl, a propeller was normally equipped with two or three straight rotor blades. Or rather, that's the only way she could imagine them to look like.

The propeller before her eyes, however, was certainly two-bladed, but the shape was quite unconventional. The blades drew a smooth half-moon-shaped curve and hence looked more like the ventilation fan of a kitchen than a propeller. Furthermore, she was also wondering why it was painted yellow, while all the other parts were white.

"Ah, yeah, the shape's yet another little highlight. It's made to get the best out of low rotational speed."

"But why are there two of them?"

Right, that was what puzzled her the most: there were two of those two-bladed propellers.

"Heh... that's... a secret."

"Uwa, that's mean."

Boss broke into a grin while looking at the offended girl.

"Just a little patience. Look forward to when it's finished. Anyway, next is this. Place it on the holding device that's labeled as 'A'."

"Whoa whoa!"

A large crate-like frame was handed to her from within the container, which she, startled, tried to hold in her hands.

It was a streamlined object that looked a little like a parallelogram with rounded corners, and was composed of shiny white material and was just about boss' size.

However, it was as light as a feather, which again did not match its appearance at all. The girl could well-nigh hold it in one hand.

Holding it aloft, she brought it to said place with rather wobbly legs. The stand had apparently been specifically designed for it, so it was finely fixated by the metal fittings on there.

"But isn't this frame... plastic?"

The material the frame consisted of was completely white and its touch, as far as she knew, was definitely that of plastic.

"Yeah, you're right. It's not ordinary plastic, though, but FRP."

"FRP?"

"Fiber-reinforced plastic. It has a 'bone' made of carbon fibres woven into it, so to speak. It's damn hard, I tell you ," he explained with a smirk. He stroked the white body with a smile that resembled the one of a little boy who had gotten a new toy. "...Heh... to think I'll be flying this baby... it's like I'm dreaming!"

"Should I pinch you? Maybe you'll wake up?" mumbled the girl.

Boss laughed only with his face while still working. " I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm flying this baby whether it's a dream or not."

She breathed up.

She sensed that this feather-light aircraft was the lifework, the very dream, of the man before her.

"Come on, here's the first wing. Take the other end."

"Uwa!"

She hurriedly grabbed the end of the wing that appeared from within the container.

The wing, which was basically just a skeleton, was covered by a material that looked like transparent vinyl. So much that she unconsciously whispered, "This looks like chopsticks with wrapping around them..."

"You're actually not so wrong, since it's just a special type of macromolecule film we wrapped around the FRP-based skeleton."

Compared to the frame she had transported beforehand, the wing was clearly more massive and had a certain weight. As the same applied to its length, boss and the girl had to move it with the greatest care.

"A-Aren't these too long? I mean, won't they break midair?"

"They're going to bend, but don't worry: we calculated them so they won't break. Besides, about this much length is necessary to fly! If you look at the aspect rate..."

"I'll pass on details. I've never been good at physics."

The girl promptly abandoned any attempt to grasp the principle behind it and carefully placed the end she was holding on the specialized holding device.

"But physics is fun, you know? And it's handy in your everyday life."

"I prefer gymnastics."

"Gh... I lose in practical use..."

While accepting her answer because of a questionable reason, he also let the wing down.

Now that they had actually placed some of the parts, it became apparent that the holding devices were positioned so that the aircraft would stand diagonally in the warehouse instead of facing the door.

Which was only too understandable, because that was the only way to fit the giant wings somehow into the warehouse.

"Okay, next is the left wing. Show me some of your strength, sports-addict."

"All right!"

The girl, by now accustomed to the work, hopped onto the container.

"Whew... this took longer than I thought."

The boy slumped on a tatami mat, with a side-glance at the brisk and sparking fire.

He was in a small prefabricated shed behind the warehouse. Apparently, it had originally served as the break room for the workers and was actually quite well-built. There was even a water conduit, though unusable.

Outside the window was a drum on a cement block, under which the fire was burning. It had quite some resemblance to the traditional drum-bath—with the exception that the water within was boiling, making it a deadly iron pot instead.

The drum was covered by a lid, which was connected by a pipe in its center to a second drum, positioned a little lower. Out of the side of this second one looked again a pipe, which this time was connected to the lid of a much smaller third drum.

Though a citizen of the civilized world would have no doubt wondered what kind of cultic ritual this was, in the current Japan it was by no means a rare sight. It was a water purifier.

The first two drums contained rain water. The water in the first drum was brought to the boil, producing steam that then went into the second barrel and cooled down there by the cool water surrounding the pipe. By the time it reached the third drum, it had become water again.

In short, by using steam that was once evaporated, they gained pure water without any pollution and bacteria.

There was a lot of water in Japan, but most of it was not pure enough to just scoop and drink it. Only a few water conduits remained intact in these times of ruin, so they had often spotted such purifiers on their journey—and had become used to using them.

En passant, the heat source of this purifier was trash. The reason was apparently to get rid of the trash and boil water at the same time. The boy was a little anxious about the dioxin emission, but he reassured himself by saying that it wasn't so much trash. It's not like he only used trash; he had also added quite some firewood.

The reason for his exhaustion was pouring the stored rain water into the drums. They weren't particularly big, but still they could store 44 gallons, which made about

200 liters. Considering the bucket he had used to scoop could take 5 liters, he'd poured water into the drum almost 40 times. While youth spared him from lower back pain, he was in for some muscle ache the following morning.

But individual work also had its bright sides: the boy made himself comfortable on the ground, fully stretching out his arms and legs.

The scent of the tatami mat under him and the soft breeze made him drowsy.

He was enveloped by a listless feeling and could have slept anytime. The only thing that kept his eyelids open, though just barely, was the crying of the cicadas far away .

Though the boy had long since given up wearing the blazer of his winter uniform, making do with only the white shirt and the necktie, the summery temperature had become hardly bearable.

Despite being at a region near the northern frontier of this country, summer was hot even here, which might have also been a benefit of a country with four seasons in a sense.

Suddenly, the boy noticed with big eyes a change to his necktie, which had a rather plain blue design and was part of the uniform specified by his school. The heat had loosened it so much that it had grown long and looked like the necktie of an office worker at a party.

The necktie was supposed to have the emblem of his high school sewn in.

However, not a single thread could be seen at the spot where the sewing had been, degrading the monotonous blue necktie to one that was really just blue.

".....Oh my. At last even the name of my old school has been «lost», huh..."

The phenomenon that was slowly corroding the world had no official name.

Neither the medical circles, which are always eager to assign long scientific names to each and every little thing, nor the scientific circles, which normally try to make complicated formulas, gave the phenomenon a name.

Even the mass media that loves so much to think up tasteless names failed at creating a grand name for this mysterious phenomenon.

At last, someone started using the generic word "the vanishing", which then spread and became common.

No one was able to explain what principle caused this disease.

Renowned scholars all over the world had since been researching its origin with all their might, but so far no one had come up with a logical explanation. It was not even known why the symptoms were different between humans and animals, respectively objects.

The disease actually starts quite harmlessly.

First, your "name" is lost. No one is able to recall it anymore, including the diseased person himself. The name vanishes without a trace from all books, digital documents, and everything else.

Secondly, your "face" is lost, meaning that you vanish from every photograph you're in. It doesn't matter whether it's a digital one, a painting or even in the memories of others.

Thirdly, your "color" is lost. Your appearance turns monochrome like the actor of a black-and-white movie.

Fourthly, your "shadow" is lost and even light passes through you.

Lastly, your very "existence" is lost and you disappear into naught. Everything you bequeathed disappears, be it paintings, texts, printings or recordings.

The only thing that remains is the memory of the people that have known you, in form of a feeling that " there was someone like you". A ambiguous memory that includes neither your name or your face. It's the end if even those memories fade out completely.

Everything one has left in the world, and even oneself, disappears without a single trace.

The speed of progression varies vastly between victims. Some disappear on the day the disease breaks

out, while for others the progress suddenly stops, allowing them to stay alive. But it can be said that in general, it progresses extremely slowly. Already four months had passed since the boy's name had been «lost».

There is no commonality between the people that contract it—the disease spreads truly randomly. While the government found themselves unable to make progress with their research—it was not even clear how many had fallen victim to the disease—the country slowly stopped functioning properly.

A little more than one year had passed since. The government was no more and all lifelines had become unstable.

The citizens that had remained here and there had started working well nigh voluntarily, struggling to maintain a lifezone to survive in.

But the atmosphere up here in the north turned out to be completely different from the slum-like conditions in the city zone the boy and girl had lived in.

There were no signs of devastation, which was probably due to the low population density, and only the odd fact that "there was nobody" remained clearly.

"HEY BOY!! Stop lazing around! Wake up!"

"Uah?!"

The angry yell that came through the open window made the boy jolt up like a mouse trap.

"You slacker... how dare you go about enjoying a comfortable nap while your companion is doing hard work?"

He was literally scared stiff of the girl's glowering scowl that was fixed on him through the screen door.

I'll get beaten up. Danger.

"I-I got it. I'm on my way!"

"Just start working already! Hurry up!"

Threatened by a pounding against the window frame from behind, he slipped into his sneakers and jumped out of the shed.

"Don't rush me so much... You slept until late today, too..."

"Because I had to stay up late yesterday."

"...voluntarily, that is."

The very next moment he was hit by a lightning-fast, unrestrained body-blow that pierced him with splendid precision where it hurt most and showed him a shower of sparks.

When they came back, boss gave them a doubtful look.

"Huh? Now it's you who's white as chalk?"

"...leave me alone!"

Boss cocked his head in response to the mosquito-pitched voice that answered him, but he quickly returned to his work.

"...So, how far did you get while I was away?"

"We've taken all the parts and tools out. It was an awful lot of work, I tell you," she told him proudly and pointed at the well-arranged parts.

The truck that had occupied a large part of the quite spacious warehouse had already been backed out. The weight of the things one could see did not at all look like it required a whole four-tonner.

However, each part on its own was rather big, which was probably the reason why that container and its capacity had been need.

"Can't human-powered aircraft normally be divided into more parts?"

"Mh? Ah, take a look at this."

The boss went to the workbench and brought something that looked like a blueprint. It wasn't too detailed, thus probably only used for putting the parts together.

"The more you break your components down, the more parts you need for linking. Weight-wise as well as

stability-wise this causes problems. Especially because the material used is plastic—you can't just use bolts and nuts on it, as it might be damaged just by screwing on."

"So that giant wing is... one big part in itself?"

"Yeah! Using the fiber reinforced plastic mixing and injection molding for large objects method our entire team developed while pulling all-nighters."

"...using *what*?" asked the girl quite half-heartedly, having trouble following him and not looking as though she was very interested.

The boss, however, beamed all the more. If he hadn't lost his color, his face would have been flushed with excitement for sure. No doubt about it.

"Alright, little one, perk up your ears: when forming the plastic, we basically put together two huge molds and injected the material, but we constructed them so that the movable parts were already completed at the time we removed the molds."

"Ah yeah? That's great, I guess?"

Her blank answer was as vague as it gets, somewhere between understanding him and not, but she probably just wanted him to stop. One could get as much by looking at her face.

"And that's a unique process made by your team?"

"Yeah. It's a compilation of existing technologies, but we're the only ones doing something of this size.....," he answered the boy proudly... and slumped his shoulders for some reason, "...there's just one problem."

"O-One problem?"

The boy was startled by the boss's rapid loss of spirits even though he had praised him. Apparently, he had quite a lot of mood swings.

Boss returned the construction plan to the workbench and stroked the large body frame that was fixed on its holding devices.

"...the material can't be recycled."

"Recycled?"

"Yeah. Of course you know that it's difficult to recycle plastic, right? The best way would be melting it and giving it a new shape, but this baby has got carbon nanotubes inside. Because of too many foreign substances it can't be recycled. But because of the carbon, it's hard to break it into pieces and throw it into a landfill site, which is the common way to dispose of waste plastic ."

"...in short, it's hard to throw it away?"

"Yeah. Moreover, while it's splendid in suppleness and elasticity, it's still plastic, hence it lacks hardness. So it's got the huge downside of being hard to dispose of in spite of being easy to break! These days you can't make any money with technologies that don't take the environment into consideration..." he said with a grand sigh and continued stroking over the frame.

Perhaps, that personality of his was the main problem that had made him vegetate in this warehouse.

"But enough of the old stories now, boss. Let's have a meal."

Nice one, girl! Her usually worrisome gluttony proved to be of use for once. The boy gave her the thumbs up in his mind.

"Mh? It's already time?"

"It's already one o'clock! I haven't had breakfast, I'm starving."

She slumped down on a pipe chair, and rubbed her stomach.

The hangover she had from yesterday's hard drinking appeared to be past history to her. If one were to measure the strength of her stomach, the result would no doubt be a tremendous number. Even that so-and-so plastic that was troubling boss would probably have been digested by her stomach without a problem.

"Hm... I guess that's not a bad idea. Well, I've only got preserved stuff, so instant noodles is pretty much all I can offer you..."

"Ah! I'll have some! I wanna eat those!"

The girl started up, and even the boy's mouth was watering.

"W-What? Are instant noodles that special?"

"Yes! You know that we're traveling by bike, right? Because of that, we can't take so much water with us, so dishes that need a lot of water are impractical to make..."

As a footnote, the boy and girl both had their respective tasks. While the boy was the driver and responsible for maintenance, the girl was the cook and responsible for their provisions. The boy didn't have a say in the control of their foodstuffs and the menu. She was surprisingly strict in that respect. Honestly.

"Well, if you're so keen on it, let's go with that for lunch. I've eaten quite a lot of it, so there's not so much left, but we should be okay."

"Yay! Hey boy! Hot water, quick!"

"Yes, yes."

The boy rushed off, urged by a dancing girl.

"...It's really odd that we're short of water because it didn't rain in the end despite that furious thunderstorm."

He clicked the switch and a blue propane flame started licking the bottom of the kettle.

The boy and the other two were sitting in the six tatamis' size break room in the shed. Thanks to the comfortable natural ventilation, it was several times cooler than outside, although the room wasn't equipped with air conditioning. A lower humidity would have been the final touch, but that would be asking for too much.

"And in comparison, a week ago we could have drowned by looking up and opening your mouth due to the heavy rain... It's sickening that we have to be stingy with water whenever we use it!"

"But well, once in the beginning, I tried drinking rain water directly."

"...just out of curiosity, what happened?"

"I did filter it first, mind you. Nevertheless, I had the runs the next day and lost more water than I took in."

"Uwa...," frowned the girl in response to boss' accurate description.

He took out a large plastic bag and poured various types of instant noodles out of it. There were several packs of each type, which was probably because he had bought them all together.

"But I've gotten through somehow since I made that boiler. Fortunately, there were tons of those drums around here. And if you conquer your weaker self, you get by with dry grass for feeding the fire."

"Once more I've come to realize that it's hard to stay at a certain place..."

"So is a journey," added the boy. A pensive mood filled the air.

As if to blow away that uncomfortable mood, the kettle on the portable stove before their eyes started to boil with a shrill whistle.

As the saying goes, "Kettles don't boil if you watch them," they start boiling in no time if you talk about something unrelated.

The serious topic went somewhere far: the wild beasts rapidly tore the packages of their instant noodles, opened them and waited for the boy to pour them hot water. The girl managed to amaze the other two by demanding hot water for two cups at the same time.

Then, for a while there was no conversation between them.

Having their appetite doubled by the agreeable empty stomach after hard work, and of course having the rare opportunity to enjoy noodles, it was especially the chopsticks of the boy and girl that moved without stop.

"Burp... I've filled my gullet..."

"...couldn't you at least use 'stomach'? You forget that you're a girl at times, don't you, girl?"

"You don't have to care about such trifles."

However, the appearance of her, leaning back while fanning herself with two empty cups before her,

resembled a messy middle-aged man like two peas in a pod, and would have surely turned off even the most devoted lover.

If the boy's magnanimity wasn't as great as the ocean, he would have turned her down even before considering a confession.

"But still, maybe it was a mistake to eat ramen, udon, and whatnot on such a hot humid day... I'm drenched."

"Just so you know, there is a bathtub," boss noted incidentally.

Her face got brighter at once.

"For real?"

"Yeah. I'll run you a bath once we're done with the work."

"Yahoo!"

She jumped to her feet, threw the fan away and grabbed the boy's arm.

"We mustn't be lazing around here! We've gotta finish our work and then it's bathing-time!"

"A-Are you looking forward to it that much?"

"What a silly question! The three pleasures of life are ' eating', 'bathing' and 'sleeping'!!"

"You'll make a horrible wife one day."

His snappy remark was silently ignored, and instead he was walked off towards the warehouse without even getting the time to put on his shoes properly.

While they didn't get on completely without a problem, there weren't any remarkable setbacks.

According to boss, the person who wrote the construction manual was as precise as it gets and did not only calculate the position of the holding devices, but also took into account the position of the tools and the

mental state of the workers. Even with amateur eyes the boy and girl could see with what passion for detail it was written—it was actually much harder to do something the wrong way.

While they weren't quite sure if they would have wanted such a person around them, the two HPA engineers with 5 hours' experience couldn't thank him enough.

They finished inspecting all the parts and could at last begin to actually connect them.

With much care, they attached the tail plane to the bottom end of the skeleton in the center, which incidentally would have been the spine for humans. When connecting the—surprisingly not V but -shaped—tail plane to the frame, whose cross-section became thinner towards the bottom like a reverse triangle, it looked almost as though the plane was wrong side up.

"...Say... I surely don't know anything about planes, but... isn't the plane at the back normally pointed upwards?"

Her question, which omitted—as was characteristic for the girl—any technical terms, caused boss to snort.

"Well, the common ones that you know are like that. Usually you want the center of gravity in the center of the machine because it makes the plane more maneuverable. However, you hardly ever change the angle when you fly a HPA, thus you put the tail plane below the machine, so it gets more stable. That way it tries to fly horizontally on its own."

The -type tail assemblies are, however, not often used in the field because of concerns regarding the takeoff and landing. It may have been a little ironical that the only major case of it being used was an unmanned reconnaissance plane from a certain big country.

"...in other words, the reason is the same as why paper planes don't have a vertical tail plane?"

"Hmmm, well, you can say that, though that's not all there is to it."

"?" the girl sent him a sceptical glance.

He took two thin wires from the base of the tail unit and pulled them softly.

With a nice click, a pair of wheels swung out from the downward-pointing tips.

"The undercarriage is contained within it. Much better than building a separate container for it, isn't it?"

"What? This plane can actually land?"

"What else did you expect?"

"I was sure you'd go for a free fall in Dover."

"...hey peewee, don't tell me you think of it as something like that show they're doing at Lake Biwa.[1]"

"It's not?!"

"Well, the record we are challenging requires doing everything from takeoff to landing with one's own power . Unlike that competition, you need to be able to do these tasks, too."

While proceeding with his explanation, he called the boy over and had him help him with the fixation of the tail plane.

Apparently, the boy knew what was to be done; he opened the toolbox at the side and took out some tools such as a spanner and a screwdriver, and started assisting boss.

"...but isn't it quite impossible for this tail assembly to take on the role as the rudder?" asked the boy without suspending his work. Boss, too, answered him from somewhere else while screwing a bolt. Those two were quite adept.

"The wings are doing that job. The tail assembly really does only the balancing. In fact, we could have just gone for an entire flying wing, but those are damn hard to balance out."

"...which galaxy is the language you are speaking from , guys?"

The girl was gazing at them with an uneasy and somewhat lonely look because the discussion they led parallel to work was dripping with words unfamiliar to her.

As they made progress and the two boy and girl became used to the work, each of them started to have their specific tasks.

Boss did the work, whereas the boy was his support. The girl, however, was in charge of bringing them the small parts and tools. And when strength was required, they joined forces.

For an example, the connection of the giant wings, which occupied the whole diagonal of the warehouse, to the body with united forces was celebrated with a hurricane of applause and rejoicings. The main sound source was of course the girl.

However, as soon as they had attached the crate-like cockpit below the body, she didn't really have anything to do anymore; the somewhat complicated, fine work had increased.

"Does the seat look okay?" asked boss.

The boy then checked the stability of the bicycle saddle by trying to jolt it. It was much firmer fixed than one would expect from something that was only attached to a plastic frame.

"Looks fine. It's stable."

"Alright, then could you do the wiring of the main wing rudder from there? But please be careful with the wires; it's a real bother to exchange them once they're ripped. There's enough material in the truck to make another set, but we don't have time."

"...got it."

The boy, now quite tense, slowly approached the nylon wire that dangled above him to the joystick, by winding it around several pulleys that were positioned in the cockpit.

"You're enviable... I wanna try sitting there, too."

"We're not doing this for fun, you know?"

"But we are, it's a pastime however you look at it."

What she said was actually quite the truth. He wasn't doing this in order to earn something, so it *was* for fun. Boss tried to counter her somehow, but he was at a complete loss for words because she had hit the bull's eye .

"You ought to put up with her. If she goes berserk in here, it will turn into a heap of pieces before we can complete it," the boy instructed him, causing the girl to put on a scowl.

"What the heck do you think I am?"

"A beast."

The next moment a bang resounded and the girl's clenched fist hit the boy.

He was sent flying out of the cockpit, whose exterior wasn't affixed yet, and landed on the bare ground.

"...looks like he has just become unable to work. I'll continue in his place."

"...do as you will." Not approval of her will, but the plea that his beloved machine remained safe was written on boss' face, which was twisted as if watching the prey consumption of a carnivore. "These wires control the torsion of the wings, got me? Connect the one with the red tip from the front to the the joystick and the blue one from behind."

"Torsion?"

In spite of the great curiosity she showed, her movement were most careful. Even the girl knew very well how dear this aircraft was to him.

She had clearly made sure that her punch a few moments before wouldn't harm the plane.

"This baby does neither have a rudder nor an elevator unit, hence the main wings are doing that job by being twisted."

"Do they really bend with this mechanism? Won't the plane come down accidentally?"

"Don't worry. I'm only going to do an 8-fly, so I will hardly need to change the course! Well, the takeoff and landing are kind of problematic, but these are over in a second."

"What about a loop?"

"You're asking me to do stunts with a plane that can barely fly?"

He nudged her head, making her laugh.

The girl didn't stop her work—which she with surprising skill—while jesting, and she was done applying the wires for steering the wings in no time.

"Do we need to adjust them now?"

"We'll leave that for when we're done assembling the rest. Next we'll go about the engine... which is basically just some cogwheels joined together, though."

The girl marveled at the gear box he tossed her.

"Boss, is this also made of plastic?"

As far as she knew and could imagine, cogwheels were normally made of metal.

The gears in the box he had given her, however, were made of something akin to plastic, whereas the case itself was acrylic. Each of them was full of tiny holes and not as heavy as their looks suggested.

"It's polystyrene. The case is acrylic. You see, they won't need to rotate really fast, and this way we need almost no oil."

"...you're insistent on making it lighter whatever it takes, aren't ya..."

"We are! The lighter the better. Otherwise it won't fly by human power."

"Would it be possible to install Cubby's engine on it and fly abroad?"

"No."

She was profoundly convinced that it was a brilliant idea, but it was immediately rejected.

Too bad. I was looking forward to a comfortable trip overseas .

When they finished attaching the engine part, boss took over the lead as the connecting of the engine with the wings required a lot of sensitivity.

The bicycle-like belt of the engine part was connected to the main spindle right below the body and finally looked like "something that can fly".

"Odd. Aren't propellers usually at the front?" the girl said and stroked the snow-white body frame.

The fact that the main wings extended right besides the cockpit did make some sense to her. The propellers, however, were not at the very front, but apparently to be brought on a bare mechanical part that was located somewhere in the middle of the body frame.

"We could have just as well put them at the front. In fact, that would be simpler and more stable."

"Then why did you not do so?"

"It's got to do with effectiveness. If we put it at the front, the produced wind would partly hit the plane itself . Apart from that... due to personal preference?"

"...isn't your personal preference kind of indifferent when the focus is on effectiveness...?"

"What are you saying?!" the boy started up and shouted at the lopsidedly smiling girl.

After being swept away, he had had no other choice but to clear away the unused holding devices while the other two had been continuing his work, whereas now he clenched his fist and started a heated speech.

"Geez, girls just don't get it! You understand the beauty of mechanics not a bit! Propellers are the decoration of a human-powered aircraft, you know? You may not be able to change anything about those elegant long wings, but you are free to do whatever you want with the propeller!"

"...Aah... yeah. Got it, got it. I won't lose another word about it, so get us a tea or something."

"...Okay."

His passion was not understood. With the by now quite light kettle in one hand, he headed to the shed, where they had prepared some more barley tea.

"...Geez, it's hard to understand those strange passions men tend to have...," sighed the girl and felt as though something named motivation or spirits left her in the same breath.

"Well, that can't be helped. Definitely a gender-based problem."

"It is? Don't you think that the environment where you grow up and such do also have an influence?"

"Might also matter a little. But don't you think that the reason why the boys throughout the country are attracted to special effects and mecha animes and whatnot lies in their nature?"

The girl groaned upon his words.

"Well, live with it. The love for machines and adventures is about as deeply rooted in our manly DNA as the love for females."

"How bothersome."

Her voice that could have been both a sigh or a weak laugh blended in the crying of the cicadas outside the sheet iron walls, and disappeared without reaching anyone.

They gradually progressed, and after sunset, when the temperature became a little more agreeable, they were 90% done.

During this time, they had proved excellent communication skills, far above what one would expect from people that had just get to know each other the other day. For instance, when it had come to the phase of inspecting the plane and such, the boy, who had lost his position to the girl, had been dragged back, and their first collective work had started with boss giving them instructions.

At the moment, the boy was in the cockpit.

He was confirming what boss told him to inspect while flipping through a thick form that contained items to inspect.

"Next on the list. Push the joystick to the right."

"Roger. To the right."

When he pushed the wooden joystick to the right, the connected nylon wires raised a creak as they were strained, and the wings on both sides were twisted into different directions.

"Checked."

"Successful," boss said and stuck a seal on the check sheet. "Now try moving it to the left."

"Roger. To the left."

Simple and precise, as well as monotonous—the girl had immediately raised the white flag, since it was clearly not work that suited her, and was now gazing at them, sitting on one of the cots that were there for taking a nap.

She was silently watching them proceeding slowly but surely, and with a rhythm, with the inspection, so as to not disturb them. Was the feeling that rose in her upon seeing that they were fine even without her alienation? Or was it jealousy? Still unable to make out her feelings, she let herself fall onto the cot. She grabbed the blanket clump that served as a pillow and put it under her head.

The boy and boss looked almost like siblings with an age gap when they worked together like now.

Without paying heed to the girl and as if obsessed by something, but on the other hand with the sparkling eyes of a child, they were putting their heart and soul into that aircraft.

Perhaps they were more like senior and junior at school. It had already been over three months since the boy and girl had attended school, but the image she had had not lost its color yet.

However, she had already forgotten the faces of half the class. She had no way of knowing whether this was due to "the vanishing" or the natural fading of her memory.

If asked whether she was worried about them, her answer would have been "yes". How were they doing? The hundreds of miles between them was equal to a world in these times of non-functional Internet and suspended telephone service.

It was probably a distance unbridgeable in their lifetime without the help of Cubby. There was even the chance that they might literally drop dead by the roadside.

The girl had no intentions of returning to their town.

She didn't know how the boy felt about it, but she wanted to continue their journey.

Their journey wasn't one with a specific target. Many asked them where their troublesome journey was headed , but they always answered like that:

«To the end of the world.»

She did not demand any meaning of their journey, nor did she care about what troubles awaited them. Not once had she thought about their destination.

The girl wasn't specially fond of reading, but there was one line, which the boy had taught her, that had stroke chord with her.

Those were the words of a certain queen in the land of mirrors.[2]

«*Here*, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.»

The girl was keeping on traveling in order to stay with the boy.

She had left everything behind that would have hindered her. The only way to go was straight ahead.

If they were to return to their hometown, then it would be after they had tripped around the globe.

"Inspection compleeete!"

Boss flung the checklist and the form away, whereas the boy let out a big breath and sat down on a chair.

Compared to the assembling stage, physical labor had virtually been non-existent, but they had been made realize first hand that physical exhaustion and mental exhaustion aren't necessarily proportional.

They had been praying to the heavens while inspecting whether the machine they had built with their own hands worked properly, so it was no surprise that their necks had gotten stiff.

"Are we done for now?"

"Yeah. We checked the default settings of the GPS and the anemometer and everything else. The parts work perfectly, too. What remains is only the flight," with a broad smile he knocked lightly on the body frame of the aircraft.

The 38.2 meters wide, 10.4 long, 30kg heavy human-powered airplane that was packed with the pride and passion of boss and his colleagues was complete.

"Filled with deep emotion...?"

"No," boss denied, upon which the boy glanced at him.

Boss softly touched the wings and stroked them gently like his own child.

"It's all tomorrow, after the flight. I'll dance and rejoice only tomorrow after I've flown. This baby is a plane after

all, not an ornament, right?" he turned around to the boy with a face that was, in contrast to his words, desperately hiding his excitement.

"...yes. It is a plane. We haven't put it together to make it rust away."

"Yeah. We mustn't jump like mad for joy just yet. Its true value lies in flying it."

These words weren't addressed to the boy, but himself. Therefore, the boy refrained from replying and wiped the sweat off his forehead, after which he breathed out.

"I hope it will be clear tomorrow."

"Are you joking? Of course it will be! If not, I'll go to court."

He almost had to laugh.

Oh well, I'll better do what I can and make a teru teru bouzu with some tissues. It's not good to use consumables without prospect of replenishment, but it should be fine once in a while.

"Uphfa,"

The next thing that could be heard after this weird utterance was a dull sound, which originated from the girl falling off her cot. Apparently, she had accidentally fallen asleep while resting on the bed.

She idly sat up and had her gaze stagger somewhere between them and the plane.

"...Done?"

"Yeah. We're done."

"...Congrats," she sent her good wishes, still half-asleep , and walked toward the aircraft. "...What's its name?"

"Huh?"

"This plane's. Its name."

The boy and boss exchanged glances.

Her question had truly taken them by surprise.

"...Geez! Well, that figures... you guys just think about putting it together, but why don't you get that you're forgetting about the most important part!"

Normally it's the men who have an urge to give inanimate things a name, but common sense didn't apply to her.

"Didn't you and your comrades come up with some name for it...? Ah, I see. It vanished, huh."

Leaving alone the two silent men, she rummaged a toolbox that had been close to her.

"Come one, you decide, boss," with these words she pressed a completely normal, extra-thick oil-based black marker. Well, there wasn't anything else to write with, since they neither had an airbrush nor a spray can.

"Is it really okay to decide on that alone?"

"In return, the name would better satisfy us. If you give it a dull name, I'll give *you* a kick in the buttocks."

Boss shrugged his shoulders, walked up to the side of the cockpit, and gazed at the transparent polymer film.

After a moment wavering, he uncapped the marker and started to write. The final letters were...

"...'Jonathan'...eh?" the boy said with round eyes, then boss turned around.

"Yeah. It's the name of the most famous seagull in the world."

Five katakana letters were written on the windshielding translucent film.

"...but your handwriting sure is scrawly... and worst of all, katakana! Why the heck didn't you use alphabetical letters? I mean, you wanted to fly this thing in Europe!"

"I don't care. I'll be flying it here. In the first place, *you* told me to write a name!"

"...somehow, that just ruined the image about as much as if we had wanted to give it a finishing touch by adding a pair of eyes, but accidentally drew nose hair instead."

"It's *that* bad?!"

"Oh whatever. Let's grab something to eat. I've gotten hungry because of my nap."

"...Women sure are fast in changing the topic."

"You don't mind it, do you? Anyhow, we're celebrating tonight! But if it's canned food again, I'll go on strike."

Boss let out a slight sigh and looked successively at the girl and the plane, wavering a little. Then he put his hands at his hips.

"Indeed... I declare tonight as the test flight eve because we have successfully completed all preparations. Well, there's not much food I have, so we'll have to put up with a curry party."

"Curry?! And you don't mean retort-packed curry?!"

"Yeah. We'll have to resort to canned carrots and meat, but the potatoes and rice are natural, and above all, the roux is a special spice blend."

Curry. The second this simple word reached their ears, their bodies started to emit a giant amount of saliva in their mouths. It had been months since they had last eaten real, non-ready, curry rice.

"A special spice blend..."

"The guy that wrote the manual made it. He liked to cook in his free time, you know. He would *all the time* come to me and tell me that he tried using 2% more turmeric or that he increased the size of his black pepper corns..."

"..."

The boy could somehow feel for him, as he was able to guess how much trouble an oddball as a friend could be.

They decided to do the cooking together. One reason for this was of course that they had to hurry up not to waste any current, now that the sun had set, but the pull of their empty stomaches was not to be underestimated, either. It also held true that they had nothing else to do anymore.

Rice was washed, potatoes were peeled, cans were opened for carrots and corned beef, and two fires were ignited, on which they then put a pot for the rice and one for the curry.

They started cooking without caring about who was doing what, and after an exceptionally short time, they had prepared their dinner.

While the number of ingredients used in the curry rice was very low, there was a whole lot of it. They virtually lunged at their dinner and ate, ready to empty both pots.

Since the boy wasn't wild about getting to see a sticky clot that pulled strings like Nattou the next morning—into which the curry rice would have turned due to the hotness and humidity of summer—it happened that even he, who would usually try to fill his stomach about 80%, ate for two.

As a footnote: they had somehow managed to find a cool place for the watermelon they had received from the director and his secretary, which resulted in excellent ripeness. The girl wanted to have the first try at splitting the melon and even blindfolded herself. By completely ignoring the confusing commands boss gave her and

instead following the warm guidance of the boy, she grandly split the melon at one go.

It goes without saying that it tasted out of this world.

When the great rush had subsided and everyone had emptied their own plate, boss suddenly asked while grabbing himself another piece of melon, "Are you going to pay the nearby town a visit?"

"Mh, I guess we will. Or rather, we couldn't get by on this journey if we didn't travel from one town to the next one. We made quite a few stops on the way, but the next will be that village, yeah."

"I see."

"Why did you ask? Something wrong with it?" asked the girl while rubbing her bloated belly.

Boss, who was munching away on his melon piece, answered her, "Nope, go ahead and stop by there. It would be a mistake to go past it even though it's lively there."

"Lively?"

"Evacuated people assembled there and have created an autonomous organization. It's right by the seaside, and they were already sending out fishing boats when I was there a few months ago, so I guess their town has flourished even more by now."

"..."

The boy and girl exchanged glances.

Nowadays, a high population in itself was of great significance. It is hard for one to obtain enough food for oneself, but it's much easier for a hundred to obtain enough food for a hundred.

By joining forces one can reach new heights.

Where there are people, there is wealth. And the two travelers were going to benefit from that wealth as well.

By the time the boy and girl were full and had successfully exterminated the curry, the rice as well as the watermelon, night had entirely fallen and the refreshing croaks of the frogs around the warehouse reached their ears.

Given that the moon and the stars in the broad cloudless sky were brightening the earth, they expected nice weather for the following day.

It was, however, still going to take some time until the humidity would start to drop. All three were sweating because their body-heat had increased thanks to the curry.

"Hey boss, mind telling me where the bath is?" asked the girl suddenly upon recalling what she had heard earlier.

Yes—this had completely slipped her memory because of the curry feast, but originally she had wanted to get done with work as fast as possible, wanting to take a bath.

"Sure, it's behind the shed. I filled it earlier and lit a fire, it should be about ready now."

Being one among them who appeared to have still some reserves in his stomach, boss stood up and beckoned them to follow him.

The boy had to admit it: he had eaten too much tonight . While holding his stomach, which was loudly complaining of excess load, he followed boss to the back of the shed, under a roof.

Right there they found the bath.

The expectations of the girl were belied, the prediction of the boy hit the bullseye.

"Seems like the warmth is just perfect. I'll let you go first."

What they discovered there was undeniably a drum bath.

It was a high-tech facility without peer, sparsely bordered by sheet metal and equipped with a naked bulb hanging from above. To crown it all, there was even shampoo and rinse ready to be used. The absence of a roof assured a stunning view of the starlit sky and the vicinity while wallowing in warm water.

"...Uuuh..."

Judging by the blatantly mixed feelings showing on her face, there seemed to be interest. However, even the boy had never taken such a wild bath. "*I should definitely ask if there are any manners that have to be followed*," the boy thought.

"Boss, how do we get into this?"

"Why, like you always do! There's a wooden chair inside to make sure it's not too hot, so all that has to be done is making a fire and entering. Also, don't complain that there's no shower."

Apparently having noticed by the tone in the boy's voice that they had no experience in bathing in a drum, he gently patted the girl on the back.

"O-Okay..."

"Aah, and by the way, the one that's not bathing has to put wood on the fire."

It took them a whole few seconds until realizing what he had just told them casually. As it had exceeded the

bounds of their understanding, it was necessary for them to do a simulation within their heads.

"Wait... you're telling us to take the bath together?!"

"...Hah? How do you want to get two into that narrow tub? One of you just has to watch the fire while the other one is in there. Like a scullion."

"You must be joking! I'm a girl, you know?!"

"Well, I know that. But you don't mind if it's him, right ? Being lovers and all."

"...Who said that?!"

Seized by the collar, boss was completely dumbfounded.

"Y-You're not? I was sure you were a couple because of your bike journey as a pair..."

With a growl she released him.

While the situation was indeed troubling, she did not really feel bad about being thought as a couple. However , it did trouble her right now. It was still too early.

"...Can't I put wood by myself?"

"No, look, drums are tall. You can't reach the ground, can you?"

Indeed. As he said, the rusted drum was tall taken by itself, but because it was also put on concrete blocks to make a fire below it, it was an impossible task to reach the ground from inside. Besides, it would have been far from her long-awaited paradise if she had to worry about the fire all the time.

"I can't do it, either... There's pretty much no way round having him do it."

"Ew..."

Well, such important decisions were always made without taking the boy's opinion into account. He was used to it.

For his part, the dread of "getting killed if he peeped" surpassed the desire of doing so by far.

"I'll kill you if you peep, okay?"

Getting the exactly same threat as he had been imagining, the boy nodded awkwardly.

His hands tied up behind his back and his eyes covered by a blindfold, he felt just like a hostage taken by a terrorist. Wondering if he was going to hear another unreasonable request along the lines of "Don't move! Hands up!" he sighed.

"Listen, I won't peep. If you leave me like this I can't even put wood on the fire. And you want to enjoy your bath to the fullest, don't you?"

"I'll untie your hands once I'm in the bathtub, so bear with it until then."

The girl, for one, thought that she had been rather cooperative.

For their relationship, which had not yet reached the couple stage, this situation was, well, err... too stimulative! This was something that should happen only after taking one step after the other with due care.

Anyhow, the girl started to undress herself somewhere the boy could not reach however hard he struggled. She found a brand new dry duck board on the bare ground and lined her shoes there.

As much as it was summer, they were at the northern island. The night was chilly and the wind blew against her naked skin.

By the way, she had also considered the possibility that boss might peep and thus commanded the boy to keep watch.

It was highly questionable how well he could keep watch without being able to see, but she was positive that he would at least notice his approaching.

When at last was naked as mother had bore her, she allied herself with a rather large towel and went on to challenge the unfamiliar bath.

She ascended the concrete block steps on tiptoes and carefully entered the bathtub with her feet.

"Oh, it's not as hot as I thought."

"Well, of course it's not! After all, I have been adjusting its warmth the whole time."

She couldn't help it, but the drum with its cylindrical shape put on a fire reminded her awfully of the boiling curry pot.

Happily enough, there was a duck board and a wooden chair in the water, so she could enter without having to strain herself.

She found it a pity that she couldn't stretch her legs, but neither did she want to be picky.

"Alright boy, show me your back and come nearer. I'll untie you."

Upon staggering towards her in a half-sitting posture, she untied the nylon rope around his wrists.

Having calmed down again, he groped for the pipe chair that was close to him and seated himself on it.

"Girl. How's the temperature?"

"Excellent, excellent. But it might be even better if it was a little warmer?"

"Roger. Your wish is my command!"

He took a piece of wood within his reach and threw it into the fire below the drum. The hand towel that was firmly wound around his head inhibited his vision, but he could still locate the fire by the heat and the dim light.

When he fanned it, it flared up golden and burned stronger.

"Hah..."

"Are you enjoying your first drum bath?" asked the boy with a lopsided smile after hearing the girl's blatantly relaxing voice.

"Oh... it's better than I expected... I've never been in such a deep bathtub before, though."

"No wonder."

"But I now think I know how the ingredients in an oden must feel."

"Hahaha"

He could only hear her voice, but it was easy to imagine what her face must have looked like. Her face was bound to be completely slack. There was some sort of afflatus that told him so.

Since she had missed out on the bath at the director's home despite being as much a bath-lover as any other girl, he was sure that she was enjoying it more than usually.

"...Boy...? Do you think 'it' will really fly tomorrow?"

Some while after he had started watching the fire, the girl addressed him rather suddenly. He stopped fanning.

"...Why do you ask?"

"No big deal, really. It's just that... it feels so unreal."

With a splash, the boy's head got drenched in water.

He could judge from the light that had just been dimmed that she was looking at him.

"Well, I mean, aren't airplanes kinda out of reach for us usually? If we get in touch with them, it's never really direct, is it? For example when following a trail with our eyes, or when getting into one for a trip."

"Do you mean that you don't think such a thing could fly?"

"I think that doesn't quite capture it," she replied and continued with a dreamy, calm voice, "You know, at least for me, making a plane is something like magic. It's not like I can't imagine how the logic behind it works. But somehow, I can't seem to accept *that* it would work."

"...in other words, that plane is a 'witch's broom' for you."

"...Sort of. That's a nice way to put it — it seems just the same no matter if someone tells you it flew with the power of lift or with the power of magic. But seriously, will that thing really fly? Being just a big empty shell," asked the girl with a wry smile.

While putting on a smile, he answered, "It will! The dreams of boss' team as well as our own are in there."

"Our dreams may make it too heavy to fly."

"Maybe. But let's believe that boss will overcome that with his spirit."

Despite the blindfold, he could vividly picture the girl's smile as she giggled.

"...Aaah, jeez! I wish I could fly it, too!"

"So that's what you were really thinking?" the boy laughed and threw another piece of wood into the fire.

"Oh shut your mouth, I can have my dreams, too, can't I? You're already monopolizing Cubby, after all. I would love to take you to the end of the world with that plane."

"There's only space for one in there."

"No problem. I'll just tie you up somewhere on there."

"You're being reckless..."

"Not at all! ...Ah, that aside, can you help me wash my hair?"

"While wearing this blindfold?"

"Yup. Be gentle, okay? If any shampoo gets into my eye, I'll choke you. Hard."

"..."

Thanks to a never-ending succession of unreasonable requests from the girl, he was condemned to even harder work than during the day, and had no opportunity to get some butterflies in his stomach.

By the time the girl happily left the bath, he was completely exhausted. Of course because of the persistent tension that exceeded the load of watching the fire many times.

About one hour had passed until he was released from the girl's long bath and could heave a sigh of relief in the warehouse.

"...I'm dead beat."

"What? Now you're a sissy. Just because of that...?"

She's outrageous. Truly outrageous. What on earth does she think got me so exhausted?

When removing his blindfold after a whole hour, even the warehouse was dazzling, though using the minimum light.

Well, the girl who had just taken a bath and was thus wearing her blouse without stuffing it into her skirt was in a sense dazzling, too.

"Jeez... Why do women always take so much time to bathe?"

All of a sudden, the girl's vision got obstructed. Her hair was being mopped crudely with a bath towel that had been dropped onto her head.

"B-Boss! Stop it... cut it out!" she complained about being treated like a child and escaped from his claws.

But his forceful drying attempt had gracefully succeeded; the moisture of her hair had been eliminated, leaving only a comfortable warmth there.

"Do you want to go in now, boss? I'm fine with being the last one."

"No, I'll have a snooze first. I'm sleepy as hell because I had to move the truck early in the morning... Ah, right, you guys, go to bed in good time today! The weather should be nice tomorrow, judging by how it is now, but

the best wind blows in the early morning, you know. Ah, and by the way: I'm used to that bath, so I don't need any help."

"When should we get up?"

"At about four o'clock. Don't oversleep!"

The girl rounded her eyes when she heard him, "*That* early?! No dice! I can't get up at such an ungodly hour!"

"Don't worry. There is an alarm clock."

"That's not the problem!" she objected, almost screaming in horror, and was patted on the back by the boy.

"...I'll wake you up, okay?"

The boy was perfectly aware that such a bothersome task would naturally be imposed on him.

"It's only been nine. If we make sure to sleep at about 10 o'clock, it should be possible to wake up, don't you think?"

"Uuh..."

The boy let out a weak sigh, seeing her still unconvinced.

"Okay, while I'm sleeping change shifts and use the bath once more. ...Ah, and boy. I bet she sponged on you, didn't she? Now's your turn!" boss said and turned around to leave toward the nap corner.

The girl wanted to say something in reply, but the boy would of course never have missed out on such a chance. He quickly went around her and stole her vision with the towel in his hands.

"Whoa! Hey?!"

"'I'll kill you if you peep' — right? Let's make sure you can't see anything."

"N-No need to do that here already!"

"Oh, it's fine, it's fine. Let's go. Thanks to your bath I'm drenched!"

Getting to have the lead for once, too, his mouth was curved in an eerie shape. If they hadn't had a blindfold, the girl would have discovered the hidden dark side of the boy at that very moment.

Almost as if carrying off a hostage, he pulled the girl behind him.

"Wait! I'll stumble! Please, remove this just for now!"

"It's fine, it's fine."

The boy affected ignorance to the finish, pretending not to have noticed that there was not shadow at boss' feet when he stood in the light.

The loss of one's shadow—such was the last stage of " the vanishing".

All of a sudden, he woke up. He had no idea what had made him awake, so it was probably correct to phrase it like that.

It felt rather odd to him because he had only been waked by the girl's punches when she rolled in sleep or by some sort of sound lately. Without any visible reason, without being left drowsy, he had suddenly woken up.

He sat up heavily and pulled the blanket he was covered in away.

The luminously painted chronograph showed two o'clock, therefore it was no surprise that the sun had not risen yet.

As he couldn't seem to fall asleep again, he decided for now to stand up. There was no trace of exhaustion in his young body, which might have been thanks to the opulent dinner he had had or to the fact that he had slept early.

This did, however, not apply to the girl who was sleeping on the neighboring bed.

She was lying prone on the cot, still in the same posture as she had written the diary, which was put next to the pillow, and snoring loudly. Moreover, the jersey

she was in the habit of using as a substitute for a pajama was round her knees, exposing her defenseless bottom, which was only covered by her white panties.

He smiled to himself, seeing her childish sleeping position, and covered her waist with a blanket so that she wouldn't get too cold. In passing, he also sneaked a peek at the diary, where he found a quite funny entry.

The content itself was nothing special, but the text got stranger and stranger towards the end: the same word appeared three times in one sentence, one sentence was suddenly aborted, and by the time the text finally turned incomprehensible, her letters were all over the page. There were even mysterious lines outside of the page. This was proof that she had gone down fighting against sleepiness.

After blurting out a giggle, he poured himself some water from a PET bottle and took a small gulp.

The sound beyond the wall of metal sheets disclosed to him how the weather was outdoors—he could hear wind blowing through the meadows. There appeared to be no rain.

Sure, they had been able to guess the weather beforehand, but upon seeing how that prediction had hit the mark, it felt sort of like their prayer had been heard. *I really ought to thank the teru teru bouzu we hung up before sleeping*.

Then, driven by a sudden hunch, he slid his hand through the shroud that divided the nap corner from the rest of the warehouse and produced a gap.

There was a still standing white plane in the center, whose elegant wings were softly bent by gravity. Despite having assisted its assembling a few hours ago, it was a breath-taking view.

In front of the aircraft, however, he spotted boss sitting cross-legged, faced toward its nose.

He couldn't recognize his countenance because it was hidden by the shadow of the wings, but there was a beer can in boss' hand and about ten more on the ground, as if forming a circle with him.

Boss' moved no muscle, and his emotions were to remain a riddle to the boy. In the end, he did not gather the courage to intrude this scene.

A while later, the boy fell asleep again.

He did not remember having had a dream that night.

The next morning, the three took the long-winged plane out of the warehouse and initiated a last check.

Even though the main entrance was more than five meters shorter than the plane's total width, by following the white lines on the ground as written in the manual, they somehow succeeded in getting it outside, kind of like solving a wire puzzle.

"...this is really incredible."

"Yeah, I seriously wonder what his brain looked like!" muttered boss while gazing at the plane on the straight road.

"Who's 'he'?"

"The guy who made the manual."

"..."

Did 'he', the writer of that perfect and precise manual, whose face and name nobody knew anymore, really think about its transport during the planning stage? She had no idea who he was, but she was not uninterested in meeting him. Well, that was not possible anymore, though.

For starters, they began removing the transport according to the manual.

The carts had been detached from the holding devices, and were now carefully removed with several special, prespecified tools so as to not damage the machine. Without remarkable effort, they managed to free all parts .

Without even needing a jack or something like that, the plane's elegant body stood on its own wheels, gazing at the horizon ahead of the long asphalt. It was truly magnificent.

"...What was this just now? Magic?"

"Who knows. Anyway, the preparations are completed ."

Boss turned around and spotted the boy, who had been taking some additional data such as the wind speed and was just trotting back.

All preparations were set.

"Boss, are you ready? Especially mentally," the girl asked.

"No, my heart is jumping out of my ears any moment," boss laughed with only his face. His body was already in the cockpit. The last check in front of the plane was being conducted by the boy who held the manual in his hands. After all, boss was the motor of this machine—an important *part*. No way to do an inspection without putting him in, too.

"Now that sounds acrobatic. Anyway, you're never mentally prepared, so get in already."

"True word."

Boss flashed a smile on hearing her unmindful encouragement and looked around in the cockpit.

There was a seat for him to seat in and a cage made of FRP surrounding it. The seat was snow-white, being made almost entirely of plastic and transparent film. The only black objects were the GPS, the altimeter, the anemometer and the transceiver for communication, which were all attached at the side of the joystick.

The thin polymer film shrouding the cage was lit by the dazzling morning light and gleamed brightly.

He had to narrow his eyes. A mysterious, awe-inspiring mood akin to beholding a stained glass window in a church filled the air of the narrow cockpit — but was completely destroyed when the boy suddenly poked his face in.

"I'm closing now, boss! You've got your handkerchief, right? What about your lunchbox?"

"I don't need one!"

"Okay, if you've still got that much energy, you'll be fine. Good luck," the boy laughed and carried a large windshield over to him.

Since all functions and equipment were kept at the minimum, there was naturally no openable door incorporated. It was necessary to screw the windshield on *after* boarding the plane.

He had to have them seal him away in this narrow space.

Despite feeling like a prisoner, strangely enough he felt no pressure. All there was was boundless rapturousness.

He felt as though he could pull off anything right now.

"Windshield attached. Go ahead."

He heard a voice from the transceiver by his ear.

"All set. I'm starting to pedal now, remove the bumper when I give you the signal," he said and put his feet on the pedals.

In order to not burden the comparatively sensitive motor unnecessarily, he started off slowly and gradually increased the rotation speed. In the small mirror that was attached to the inner side of the windshield, he could see the contra-rotating propellers he was so proud of move.

Don't worry, it will definitely soar up!

"Remove the bumper!"

"Roger."

It was but a short command.

The real fight was yet to come. His comrades had built the aircraft, the boy and girl had put it together, and he had to fly it.

This was his first and final task. The world that was going to unfold before him now was only his and no one else's.

"Hurry up, boy! Hurry up!" the girl rushed.

She had finished her work quickly and had gotten on the tandem of the super cub, which was stopped by the road. The luggage was almost entirely taken off so that they could drive along with the plane.

"I know. Don't worry, it won't fly away just like that!"

Well, he had tried to calm the excited girl, but apparently he was very excited himself: he had quite some trouble putting the key into the hole.

When he finally managed to turn the key and switched on the ignition, Cubby's heart started to roar loudly. He kicked up the stand more violently than he did usually, opened the throttle slightly and moved onto the road.

The plane, however, was still there, moving straight ahead at the speed of slowly pedaling a bicycle.

The yellow contra-rotating propellers were rotating properly, cutting the wind, but there was no sign of soaring up yet.

For the time being, he chose to follow the plane from diagonally behind at about the same speed, so as to not get in its way.

"Is everything alright? Will it fly?"

The boy answered the girl's anxious question with a laugh, "No worries. He's arriving at a declining slope any moment, and he even has some headwind. It's bound to fly!"

Just as the boy had announced, as soon as the plane arrived at a slightly declining slope, the previously very slow acceleration started to increase bit by bit.

It's not like the boy knew what was needed for the takeoff of a human-powered aircraft. But he gathered that an appropriately high speed was required.

Cubby's speedometer was almost at 20kmph. He supposed that it was about time that it hovered a little.

Boss, who could be seen past the transparent windshield, was not paying them any attention whatsoever. He was solely staring straight ahead, pedaling with all his might.

That moment, he saw boss pulling the joystick.

The nylon wires that were connected to it conveyed his movement to the wings and made them bend slightly.

The tiny lift that emerged at that moment caused the super-light machine to hover slightly over the ground.

"It's flying!"

"Not just yet!"

Suppressing the girl who was about to leap for joy, he opened some distance between him and the plane to be sure.

The plane, which was hovering close to the ground, pulled in its wheels under the tail assembly and the cockpit, and continued its shaky flight at an unsettling height.

At the moment it was merely hovering due to the ground effect that was formed by the wings and the ground. He had to elevate in order to make it a "flight".

Boss was pedaling like mad, but the height was only barely increasing.

"Is he really going to be okay?"

"Don't worry. He's almost there. He's almost at 25kmph!"

His voice came out louder than he had wanted, but he didn't care in the least.

*It's going to fly! It will **not** fall!*

As if to display his unshakable faith, the boy opened the throttle and sped up Cubby. While the girl was clinging to him in surprise, he moved the motorbike to the side of the wings.

If the plane fell, they were probably going to be dragged in.

But the word "if" was already out of question. Boss was going to pull it off somehow. He was sure of that.

Then at last, the lift produced by the long wings grew strong enough to sustain the weight of the plane thanks to the speed.

The shaky flight suddenly leveled off and the almost 40-meters giant wings jumped up as if pulled to the sky.

"He soared up!"

"He did it!"

They yelled almost synchronously, causing the accidently driverless Cubby to stagger.

The plane elevated as if drawn up by the sky and gleamed in the morning sun.

Its course was north and its altitude about 40 meters. The flight had entirely gotten stable.

"You did it, boss!"

"Yeah, I sure did!"

They could hear an enthralled voice from the transceiver. It was not hard at all to imagine his face from that excited voice.

"It feels terrific...! Just as I felt at my first flight... no, it's even better!"

"Please enjoy it to the fullest. We can't take part in it, after all."

The girl, too, was smiling at his rarely turbulent voice before she knew it.

"I feel as if I could go anywhere right now... I can't thank you enough, guys..."

"Thank us to your heart's content then. With gas."

Her capitalistic remark was, however, not countered with irony.

"Sure! Take as much as you want! This feeling is all I need! ...I wanted to show this scenery to everyone else, too, but... even if they were here now, there's only space for one... so it would still have been only me in the end, huh..."

The airplane in front of the super cub started to easefully shake left and right.

Boss was probably tilting the joystick because of his strong emotions. However, the plane was designed for 8-flights; while withstanding most movements, it was not able to do small ones.

But still, the giant white plane was inexpressibly beautiful as it drew a curve while inclining slightly.

"Umm, boss? Could you let me fly it as well?"

The boy answered the girl's mumble into the transceiver by poking her.

"Hey girl, that's boss' plane! It's not right for us to ask for something like that..."

"But we also helped him, didn't we? I want to get on it about once at least!"

"You don't know how to control, do you?"

"But there is someone who knows, isn't there? Boooss, pretty please?"

Shaking off his restrain, she addressed boss over the transceiver with a pleading voice.

Well, boss was not going to give in to such a voice, so the boy didn't mind.

"Why, of course! I want to show this to you guys!"

"Huh?!" the boy blurted out in a strange tone, his expectations completely belied.

Apparently, boss' good mood was vastly exceeding all his predictions.

The girl, on the other hand, seized the opportunity and spoke while leaning forward into the transceiver, "Umm... if I'll crash into something, forgive me please?"

"I don't mind! One or two dents are no problem to fix! We even have a spare frame! We can fix it as many tim
"

His voice broke off.

"Boss...?" asked the girl while tilting her head.

No reaction.

"What's wrong?"

"Dunno. It suddenly turned silent."

The boy took the transceiver in his left hand and checked the LCD display. The battery wasn't empty. Neither was boss out of range for the signal yet. But it did not seem to be broken, either.

"...huh? Boy, what's that...?"

The girl pointed at the sky. Not the sky, to be precise, but the snow-white plane in it.

The contra-rotating propellers, which boss had proudly painted yellow to make them visible from afar, had almost stopped moving. It didn't look like they were rotating on their own, but because of the wind.

The beautiful white plane that had stopped moving started dropping step by step, tilting to one side.

It crashed into the softly swaying green ground.

"Boy!!"

"Yeah!"

The girl clung swiftly to his waist, whereas the boy opened the throttle of the super cub as if to answer her.

He turned the handle to the side and jumped out of the road into the definitely *not* low grass.

They rushed toward the crash site they could see between the grass while mowing down the grass in their way, which had grown about to their waist's height.

The sharp blades of the grass cut into their uncovered cheeks and arms, but they couldn't care less.

Cubby then suddenly arrived at a place where the grass turned low.

They unconsciously took a breath.

At this place, which was about a small square's size, was the snow-white plane.

Its nose had stuck in the earth, the fine plastic cockpit seat had been entirely crushed, the wing had been broken due to the blow against the ground, and the transparent film was fluttering in the wind.

The only parts that escaped the crash, the frame itself and the tail assembly, were stuck in the ground, poking out towards the sky, and seemed almost like a white, futuristic sculpture.

The two, who had completely frozen, suddenly came to and got off the super cub and ran—towards the "thing that had been an airplane", without caring about the falling over Cubby.

"Boy! Can we move this?!"

"Yeah! Take that side!"

The two grabbed the body that was stuck in the ground and pulled it out like operating a lever.

They could clearly hear the wings get twisted, but neither of them cared.

The tail assembly touched the ground whereas the crushed cockpit appeared.

"Boss!"

The girl forcefully took off the windshield and looked into it — to find nobody.

Not even his clothes were left there.

They hardly exchanged any words after that. That is because it didn't require any explanation.

Boss had vanished. Not only he, but also his clothes and shoes along with him had suddenly disappeared from the cockpit. The microphone of the transceiver which he had worn was not to be found anywhere, either .

The two knew more than enough what that meant.

Boss had *vanished*.

In a few words they decided to carry the remains of the aircraft back to the warehouse. There was no special point in doing so, but they somehow did not wanted to leave it out in the open like that, therefore they started without dispute.

As the plane was disturbingly destroyed, the transport in itself was not hard.

They took apart what they could and cut apart with a hatchet for splitting wood what they could not, and carried the parts back.

They were finished so fast, it seemed unbelievable that it had taken so much effort to put it together.

The wide sky and the unreservedly shining sun were no different from an hour ago, but somehow they looked much duller.

They stood before the remnants of the aircraft in the warehouse.

"...I wonder where boss has gone," muttered the girl.

The boy shook his head, "I'm sorry. I don't know."

"...No one knows. Whoever you ask in the world, no one knows where they disappear to."

Neither of them suggested that he may have just vanished into nothingness, for that was what they and the rest of the world feared.

They didn't believe in heaven and hell, but neither did they want to believe that the ones who had disappeared had simply vanished as the word suggested.

"What are we going to do... with that?" asked the girl while squatting by the remains of the plane and gazed at its degenerated appearance.

The cockpit that had consisted of the absolute minimum of material had completely lost its former shape because of the direct crash with the ground.

The pedals and the motor were still somewhat intact, but the deformation and damage of those was heavy, making it very unlikely for them to soar up to the sky once again.

The wings had fallen apart entirely, and they found themselves unable to repair their twisted frame or the torn film. The body frame was still okay, but the connecting piece to the wings and the motor component, which had been connected to the cockpit, had gotten deformed, and the yellow propellers broke to pieces with two blades missing entirely. Thanks to the fact that the plane had crashed headfirst, the tail assembly was undamaged, but that didn't change anything.

The girl was not versed in mechanics, but she could easily imagine what fate was waiting for those remains.

"I'm afraid there's nothing we can do."

"...'suppose so."

"But as boss said, there were spare parts in the container," the boy muttered.

The girl raised her face. "Can we fix it then?"

"I don't know. He said that there were enough parts to make one more aircraft, but without checking we don't know how much there really is."

The glimmer that had come in sight was too faint to be called hope.

The two had merely followed boss' instructions. They did by no means know how the plane was to be put together or what they were supposed to pay attention to. Above all, there was no point in assembling another aircraft as boss was no more.

"Shall we go then?" suggested the girl as she stood up.

"Go?" asked the boy.

The girl responded him with a, slightly acted, smile, " On our journey. Boss' job here has ended, but our journey is still going to continue, isn't it?"

After adjusting her clothes, she walked toward the nap corner.

"...True. Yeah, we're still on the way," he said and shook his head to recollect himself.

Right. They were aiming for the end of the world, after all. They had no reason nor the time to be lost here in grief.

The girl took a small scrap of film out of her pocket.

It was an extremely tin piece of polymer film, which looked like some wrapping at first glance. On it, however , were the black letters "Jonathan", written with a marker. In this crawly handwriting they could still clearly sense his aura.

She inserted the piece of film like a bookmark into the thick assembling manual and put it in front of the remnants of the white plane.

The two went to the nap corner to collect and pack their things.

Because these two busy days had left them with quite a mess, they needed some time to get ready, but since they were used to it nonetheless, they managed to load everything onto Cubby within twenty minutes.

Making good on boss' promise, they filled Cubby's tank with gas and also decided to take some foodstuff, such as cans that seemed to last a while and rice, with them.

After that, with a silent understanding between them, they started to lightly clean the warehouse and the shed.

By the time they had finished all preparations and met up before their super cub in a corner of the warehouse, the clock was showing 08:00am.

"What are we going to do with the truck?" asked the girl.

"Do we even need to do anything with it? We don't need it, after all."

"...Oh dear! The whacked out trip on Cubby is still going to continue, huh..."

"If you talk like that, Cubby will sulk and break down! "

"That would be bad," she smiled wryly and inspected their provisions.

"Do we have water?"

"Yeah, I filled our bottles."

The boy finished inspecting the super cub, too, and put on his helmet.

"Alright. Are we set?"

"Aah..."

The boy put a helmet on her head while she let out a strange voice.

"What? Are we missing something?"

"Umm... No, it's fine. Should be," she answered ambiguously.

The boy tilted his head and asked whether they should stay for a little longer, but this proposal was rejected.

"According to what boss told us, the neighboring town is quite far away, right? The sooner we leave the better."

"Well, you've got a point. So it's really fine?"

"Yeah. OK, OK!"

While being patted on the back, the boy sat down on Cubby.

He turned the key, upon which a light humming started to resound as always.

After making sure the girl was clinging to him, he opened the throttle and drove off, holding against the faint gravity that emerged.

Thinking back, they had only spent a mere two days here.

This was probably what it felt like to leave a place with painful reluctance. While knowing there was no point in staying in that warehouse, it felt as though they were leaving something—something dear—behind there. They couldn't do anything about that reluctance.

He felt the girl press her head against his back and squeezed the handle.

It took only a few minutes until the warehouse had disappeared behind the hills of the road from the back mirror.

Interlude

The boy did not stop even when the sun had finished its turn and had disappeared behind the horizon. It also held true that they were a little late due to accidentally taking a wrong road, but the main reason was of an emotional nature.

When he closed his eyes, all he could recall from boss' face had become awfully vague because of the vanishing. The same applied to his stature, his voice, and the way he had talked to them. Almost everything that had defined boss had lost its shape like ice in boiling water and melted, blending in the boy's miscellaneous memories.

Every time he tried to recall his appearance, which had suffered disintegration of its Gestalt, he only felt as if having a déja-vu. When he struggled anyway, his pathless thinking twisted and broke off, leaving only an uncomfortable nausea behind.

"Shall we take a break here?"

He couldn't bring himself to say this suggestion.

He frequently stroked the girl's arms which were put around his waist as he drove on. The loss of a near person had made him anxious about *her* existence, having shared almost every moment for three months with her. Just by thinking *what if she vanished as well*, he was struck by a gut-wrenching insecurity and had to stroke her hand again.

With his head, he did understand that it was highly unlikely for her to suddenly disappear as she was still in the initial stage. But while riding the bike, he could just not see her face. He felt as though she could vanish any moment if he forgot about her and couldn't calm down.

Seemingly aware of his feelings, the girl tightly clung to him, pressing her body against his.

Wanting to talk to her, he opened his mouth, and searching for a topic, he closed and opened it only to eventually leave it shut. After he had repeated this meaningless cycle multiple times:

"...Boy?"

In surprise at her sudden voice, his frozen hands convulsed and gripped the brake.

She screamed out because of the sudden full braking and the Super Cub span out of control. This was apparently enough to wake up his dulled primary motor cortex—he hurriedly balanced the bike out and stopped it.

"...S-Sorry. Are you okay?"

"Hey... are you really all right?"

The boy was doubting his state of mind even without her question. What had happened to Boss did by no means justify such a behavior while driving.

He ground his teeth in vexation of his fragile mind, and looked up at the sky.

"...Um. Anyway, what did you want to say?"

"...Look, doesn't this vicinity look like a village or something?"

She stretched out her arms from behind and turned the handle.

The headlight of their super cub lit their surroundings and revealed a deserted building to them.

"You're right..."

They couldn't make out the details because the light created many shadows, but it was clearly someone's house. And there was not only one or two. Now that he thought about it, the on-going meadows scenery had suddenly broke off, and instead he had spotted many human-groomed things like copses and fields.

The girl took a map out of their luggage and took a look at it.

"Yeah. It's hard to tell because the names have gone, but this is probably a small village!"

The boy stopped the engine and took out two pocket lamps.

Lit by those two light sources, the appearance of the village became apparent.

He heard how the girl held her breath behind him.

Ruins. What they found were ruins.

Originally, this had probably been a village of decent size. There were large fields, many houses, and wide premises—as was usual for this island—with light trucks parked on.

However, there was not a soul. There was no single resident in this village.

Most of the buildings had collapsed due to snowfall of the past winters, looking as thought they had been trampled down, and those that were not had gaping holes in their roofs. The sheets that were still hanging from the clothesline had turned into old dustcloths.

Somewhere they spotted a light truck with an opened door. Somewhere else they discovered a satchel in the middle of the street. In the middle of a field there was a tractor that had gone stale there.

Even though there were traces of the habitants everywhere, there was not a soul. Only the crying of the insects and the blowing of the wind filled the air.

He felt his heartbeat grow heavy. He knew this feeling.

The capital, the nameless metropolis they had abandoned, the town that had lost more than 80% of its population and its entire functionality, was the same.

The convenience store on the way to school, the footbridge across the big intersection that had become empty of cars and whose traffic lights had stopped working, the lightless skyscraper he had gazed at from school at dusk.

His heart was spurred on by the distressing lack of people where there should have been.

"...Boy."

She plucked at the sleeve of his shirt.

He turned around and found the girl stuck to his back, trembling fiercely.

"Boy... I don't like this place," she mumbled with her gaze focused on one point.

The object that was horrifying her so much was a red satchel that lay on the street.

"Let's go. I don't want to be here. Not for one second."

"...Yeah..."

He nodded and quickly stuffed his lamp into his pocket.

He started the engine, put on his helmet, accelerated rather crudely and hit the nightly road again.

This village resembled their town too much.

Sealed memories were released again and caused cold shivers to run down their spines.

Silence enveloped the village once more.

Journey

"...Sucks," she grumbled, sitting on the passenger seat and looking up through the front glass at the clouds that covered the entire sky like a blanket made of old dirty wool.

"Yeah... maybe the sun has left you in the lurch at last? " he said in jest as he wrung his soaked socks in a gap he had opened the door to.

The persistent rain outside did not seem to end anytime soon, whereas the clothes they had taken off did not seem to get dry anytime soon.

A few days had passed since they had left Boss' warehouse. The two had followed the now-deserted road , aiming for the neighboring town as originally planned. Although they had made a short detour because of mistaking the way, they had managed—with more or less effort—to keep their delay at one day.

But at dusk today they had fallen victim to an assault of rain.

Only after a short while it had literally started to rain in torrents, inevitably bringing them to resemble drowned rats.

Of course they were not thoughtless. They always carried their rain gears with them, and they had a blue tarp to use as a makeshift tent — they hadn't been traveling for three months without happening upon one or two rain showers.

That said, those items had come to no use this time.

It was not reasonable to expect to ride Cubby while holding a plastic umbrella, and their cheap rain coats, bought in some convenience store, had stood no chance against that rain. Even worse, the strong wind kept them from setting up a tent.

The two had not had any choice but to start searching for a shelter in their useless rain coats while praying to any god that came to mind.

If their prayers had reached the gods or if some devil had taken mercy on them remains a mystery, but after a few hours' ride, when rain water had seeped through

every corner of their cold bodies from their hair-ends down to the seams of their pants, the boy had found a deserted station wagon on the street.

Thanks to the fact that the backseats could be folded down, they made two sections by hanging up a vinyl sheet in the center and decided to put on a change of clothes each. It wasn't their first night in a car, so the procedure wasn't new to them anymore. Fortunately, the car seemed to be sealed air-tight: there were no signs of any leaks or mold.

They took off one piece of clothing after another, opened the door slightly and wrung the wetness out of them as much as possible before going on to the next one. Their clothes weren't going to get dry from just that, but if they had let them be, they would have gotten moldy. By the time they had taken off all their clothes, changed into fresh underwear and wrapped themselves in some blankets, they felt completely exhausted.

"Mm, what's the time?"

"Err... about ten. Ages after the time we should have had dinner!"

"Aah... so *that's* why I'm starving...," she said while rubbing her belly.

The boy was completely of the same mind.

"I was going to make us some tea, but do you want to eat something light with it?"

"Sure. As a substitute for dinner."

The boy opened their luggage and took out a portable stove and a tiny kettle. Since he wasn't too keen on being short of oxygen, he left the door ajar. The incoming rain was bearable if it was just for a short while.

He put a wooden board, which he had found in the trunk, on the seat in the middle and started to boil water there. With the rushing of rain adding to the already silent mood, there eventually ceased to be any conversation between them. Until the water started to boil, only the sound of raindrops could be heard inside the car.

As soon as the water boiled, the boy immediately put out the stove and retained the warm air by closing the door. He then poured water into their mugs and dropped a tea bag into each one.

The silence that returned was broken shortly afterward by the girl sneezing.

"Are you cold?"

"Nah, I'm fine. But aren't you? The rain should have hit you harder than me, after all," she inquired with a lopsided smile.

The boy responded with a laugh, "Fear not, milady! I do not shiver and snivel easily for I am naught but a rough and uncouth swain. But, as thou art a fine and delicate maiden, must needs always be comforted and cosseted as befits thee."

Queer as it was, the brown blanket the girl had wrapped around herself suddenly looked like an elegant courtly gown[1] when he used such a style of speaking.

"Milady, thy tea."

He held out her blue mug toward her seat.

"Mm, thou didst not labor in vain. We are well pleased ."

She accepted her mug and looked down at the brown liquid filling it to the brim. A strong fragrance rose together with hot steam like a living being from from the black tea, despite it being of a cheap grade, and tickled the girl's nose. *Way too strong! Well, but he made it caring about me, so I'll be grateful.*

The boy handed her some rock-hard sugar cubes, which she dropped into her mug and stirred. A slightly bitter yet fragrant aroma warmed her up from the inside when she took a gulp.

"...lovely warm..."

"Well, it's fresh from the kettle!"

"...awfully bitter..."

"I'm sorry..."

They shared a laugh together.

After ending their simple dinner consisting of ship's biscuits and black tea, they finished some tasks such as putting their luggage in order and checking their provisions, and then went to sleep early.

In the end, they woke up when the clock showed 7am—still raining outside. While he had the impression that the rain had weakened a little, the cloud were still as thick as before and did not let a sunbeam through.

He twisted his body and tried to stretch himself on the narrow passenger seat. He had slept longer than expected, making him realize that he had apparently been quite exhausted. He was tied up in knots, so to speak, and every time he bent himself like a resisting fish on a bait, a pop resounded from some part of his body.

Flabbergasted by his strange movements—or perhaps just waking up—the blanket dumpling on the back seat, aka the girl, started rustling.

Her head came poking out of the dumpling, took a look at the situation outside and sunk into the blanket again. With a depressed sigh, the dumpling eventually sat up.

"Morning..."

"Mm, good morning."

Considering her usual difficulties in waking up, she had gotten up rather nicely, which was probably to be attributed to the sound sleep she had had. They had recovered from most of the exhaustion of the half day's ride.

Now that the desire for sleep had been fulfilled, however, the entrance of the next desire was a matter of course. The boy's stomach gave voice to its displeasure by rumbling aloud.

"I guess I'll have breakfast now—do you want to have something, too?"

"...Nah, thanks."

The boy was thunderstruck.

It was the very first time during their three months' long journey that it wasn't her who complained of an empty stomach.

"Are you feeling unwell?"

"Hey now... do you think I'm a glutton or something?"

"Yeah."

Preparing for a punch in the next moment, he kept his head down.

However, there was no payback. Something *was* wrong, undoubtedly.

"Let me take your temperature."

"No, really, I'm fine..."

"No. Objection overruled."

Upon closer examination, her color was clearly not normal. Her hale, tanned skin had turned a little pale.

The boy slipped through between the passenger and driver seat, still rolled up in his blanket, and crouched down by the girl. In his right hand he was holding a thermometer from their luggage.

"Come on, you're not well, are you? No need shamming in front of me, so please take your temperature at least."

"...Okay."

Finally giving in, she meekly accepted the thermometer and stuck it in her armpit after some struggling. Since she was wearing nothing but her underwear under the blanket, the boy turned from her just to be sure.

In the meantime, he opened their portable first aid kit and checked their stock of medicines.

"I wonder what it is. Did you catch a cold, or something?"

The girl just turned away from him without answering .

"...the rain, I suspect. But that's odd, I had no problems ..."

In an instant she grabbed him by the collar and scowled at him with a creepy grimace.

"There's that bothersome event once a month for us girls!!" she roared, making him shrink and go on his fours.

"P-Please forgive my rudeness, milady..."

"...Looks like you got it. I think it will last a while, but don't mind it since we can't escape until the rain stops anyway."

"...Honestly, I have no idea of anything in that respect, being a boy and all, you know, so... are you alright?"

"Hm... mine are quite light usually... but it doesn't look too good this time..." she explained as she hunched up, embracing her stomach.

"Do you want a painkiller?"

"Actually, I've already taken one before sleeping. Did it already wear off...?"

Men aren't of much use at such times. While they managed the medicine together, her sanitary items weren't in the boy's control, so he just took a tablet out of a package that claimed to be good against headaches and menstrual pain.

"Here, and some water."

The girl sat up sluggishly and accepted the water and tablet from him.

"...I actually wanted to restock some of our stuff when we were at the warehouse. Well, I should have borrowed some from the secretary, but I completely forgot..."

"So that's what you were searching for?"

"Yeah."

She gulped the tablet down with some water and handed him her cup. Normally, she would have emptied it, but this time there was still some water left. Probably, her stomach was affected as well.

He drunk up the remaining content himself and wiped his mouth.

"Do you still want to eat something?"

"...No, thanks."

Most likely, it would be best to have her take in something, but he didn't want to force her. Instead, he handed her a vitamin jelly he had found.

Her temperature was 37.9°C. Rather high.

The time was 02:00pm.

The rain was still falling and the girl's condition had worsened dramatically.

In the beginning, she'd frequently sat up to do things such as changing the cloth, but after noon, she'd stopped moving and started cycling between light sleep and awakening.

Having used their last remaining antifebrile, her fever had exceeded the 38°C mark. Even the boy realized that this could never come just from the monthly thing. He suspected that she had caught a cold on top of it. Considering that she had been exposed so long to so much rain, there was even a possibility of lung inflammation.

Even if it was not pneumonia, how should he deal with any other illness? The only medicaments at hand were a couple of headache and cold tablets and some

ointment. He had no means of treating any illness more serious than a cold. All he could do was putting a cloth wet with rain water on her forehead.

She was in danger.

He could not help but admit that he had been thoughtless not to consider such a situation during the entire three months they had been on the go. It was actually rather surprising that this had not happened before on their journey, which was so equally heavily based on strong luck and good fortune.

However, he wasn't given the time to regret the mistake he had made. The boy found himself confronted with a choice that was many times harder than any of the numerous exams he had come to pass during nine years of compulsory education.

Stay here and gamble on the girl's innate immune system ?

Alternatively, go to the neighboring town by himself and catch a doctor?

Both choices had flaws that piled up to Mount Everest's height.

—On top of it being unknown whether it was an illness that could actually be cured by her immune system, this situation had come about *because* that immune system had been weakened. What if it was an illness that couldn't be cured without treatment of a doctor?

—If he went alone to a doctor, how high was the probability of that doctor accepting to come along for an inspection? What if he didn't find one? Who was going to look for the girl while he was away? Did he have enough fuel?

Either way was one all-or-nothing gamble—in which it was even unsure whether his efforts were of any use. The girl bore all the risk.

The boy clenched his teeth, vexed by his own weakness, and glared at the sky and the never-ending rain.

Time went on and he was left changing the wet towel on her forehead and holding her hand.

While still glaring at the clouds outside of the window, a certain outrageous idea came to his mind.

Struggling through to the next town with the girl on his back.

As the town appeared to be well-populated, there was supposed to be one or two doctors, and if he refused to examine her, the boy could threaten him.

This way he only needed fuel for one way and the doctor could look at her twice as fast as compared to going alone and bringing him along. Though he was going to be unable to care for her while driving, he could still stop from time to time to take a look at her.

However, this gamble was much riskier than the other two. Carrying a seriously ill patient on a Super Cub through the pouring rain sounded like a foolish idea

however one looked at it. Even the boy, originator and executor of the idea, was about to doubt his state of mind .

However. However, she *was suffering* as he kept thinking—worn out by illness, even though she weighted six kilos less than him anyway despite being the same height.

Not even able to cry for help, his dear girl was suffering.

He was not able nor did he want to blink the facts.

The time was winding down.

The boy started packing more swiftly and skillfully than ever before.

He gathered that he couldn't go with their usual sitting position. Carrying someone whose strength has completely drained is a troublesome task — worse than a water-filled mannequin. Even when tying her to him, putting her on the tandem would leave the risk that her legs might get caught up in the back wheel.

There was only one way to go about it: binding her on him while hugging each other and riding while sustaining her. Lucky in the circumstances perhaps, the Super Cub motorcycle was designed mainly for fulfilling work with it, therefore could be driven one-handedly. If he could really endure such a long stretch, riding at full speed with one hand, was left to be seen, but he had no intention of considering any problems that he could solve with some effort on his part.

As for her clothes, making her wear a skirt was no good as her body temperature would drop. He dressed her in two jerseys they had in reserve and put a raincoat around her after covering her in a thin blanket.

Changing the clothes of the unconscious girl in the narrow car required to twist her body like an entanglement puzzle, but that was easier than walking through a one-way labyrinth compared to seeing her half-naked in all those positions.

While struggling to contain himself for all he was worth, he changed her into trousers. They were baggy around her waist, but he fixed that by tightening the belt.

He had considered leaving the luggage behind, but decided against it.

If he didn't find a doctor, he would have to search on with lacking provisions, and if he did find one, he may demand some kind of payment. They were going to slow down, but that couldn't be helped. He had to believe in her willpower.

He tied her up to him using their hammock net and laundry rope and made sure he could even walk around with her like that. The girl would have beaten the living daylight out of him if she saw how they were bound on each other.

But he was determined to do anything to have her regain that liveliness.

He put on a rain coat as well and slipped into his still half-wet blazer. The soaked synthetic fiber was heavy, but this was his combat uniform.

Bidding farewell to the wagon car that had served them well as a temporary shelter, he entered the never-ending rain outside.

For the ones that may be to come, he closed the door.

The remaining question was whether the Super Cub still worked after being exposed to the rain for so long.

The tank was full. However, while he had protected it with a vinyl sheet, it had still been exposed to the rain. It was left to be seen if he could properly move it.

But right now, the boy was not ready have any consideration for Cubby.

He jumped onto the saddle and checked whether the girl sat firmly. He had tied up all their luggage on the tandem seat to achieve a balance.

While listening to the sound of the rain hitting their rain coats, he put on his goggle-type helmet.

Super Cub! Show me what you can!

He stepped on the starter with a vengeance.

He didn't know whether his Super Cub answered, " Leave it to me!".

But the powerful roar the 4-stroke air cooled single cylinder raised appeared more reassuring to him than any other reply could have.

The Super Cub was running down a straight road in the pouring rain.

Its speedometer was wavering past the maximum mark and the rain drops that would have been harmless water normally were hitting the boy's head like pellets. His grip on the throttle, however, did not show the slightest sign of loosening.

While embraced in his arms, the girl was lost in thought.

As much as she appreciated the boy's nursing, she could in fact not clearly remember anything that had happened after noon.

Her field of vision was shaking despite there was no earthquake—because of her fever, she suspected.

Cubby's loud echoing humming right beside her ear was nerve-splitting. She could feel the boy and his

pleasantly cold raincoat, therefore she wondered if by any chance she was in his arms.

She could not really tell what position she was in anymore because the light dizziness she had been suffering from since the morning had become worse and worse. She felt as though her head was being shaken about.

To make matters even worse, her stomach was on the very brink of sparking off a revolution. A nasty combination of nausea and stomach-ache turned her abdominal region into a living hell. It hurt as though something spiky like a crocodile or a chestnut was inside.

Strangely enough, one gets a cool head when unwell like that; even while being shaken in his arms, she found herself watching the scene from somewhere in a corner of her head.

Not only her vision and her ears had gone to pieces, but also her nose and sense of taste, so she failed to grasp was going on. Perhaps she had just gotten off her head because of her fever, anyway, but she didn't particularly care.

"Still...," she thought, *"are all boys cold like this?"* It might have been pouring, but it was still summer. Yet his boy was cold.

"Aah," she found a lucid explanation. *She* was hot. Relativity was bound to be the cause.

"Still...," she thought again, *"since when have my periods become so bad? How embarrassing!"* Sure, she'd had a hunch that it was about to start since a few days ago, but she hadn't expected that she would be knocked out so easily. *Jeez, it sure sucks to be a girl at times.*

When she fell asleep at such times, she would never have good dreams.

"But well, if I get him to look after me like this," she thought, *"it might not be bad to get a fever once in a while even so."* After all, this way she could get him to hug her completely legally and without seeming awkward!

Mysteriously though, she wasn't haunted by any nightmares during the time she was in his arms.

"This is bad... her fever has gotten very high...," he grumbled while feeling her forehead.

Holding the girl in his arms, he stopped the bike and supported himself with his leg.

Since she was constantly trembling, he gave only her a disposable hand warmer, but there was no way something like that could do the trick. She wasn't pale anymore. Instead, she had become as red as a tomato and was breathing wildly.

Perhaps he could consider himself lucky in the circumstance that the rain had weakened after two hours, but there was still no trace of a patch of blue sky. He also used their last cooling gel sheet on her, but it remained to see whether this was of any use...

He had done everything he could. All that was left now was to head straight for the neighboring town, believing in her constitution.

Putting power into his numb left hand in order to sustain her, he tightened his grip around her.

Cubby's engine that had completely warmed up was humming without stop.

It was past six when the "neighboring town" boss had told them about came in sight. As he said, it seemed to be a port town: beyond the misty townscape he could see the vast blue sea. He was approaching a port.

There were still about four or five kilometers between them, so he could not really make out much yet.

He tried lifting his goggle and peeping through his binoculars, but with the current weather and the poor magnification, it was of no avail.

There was nothing to worry about if it was a peaceful town. However, in these times of chaos, "peaceful towns" weren't so common. There were even ones that were left deserted because of plunder and raging riots.

The most dreadful ones, however, were the towns that had decided on a closed-door policy and would do anything to protect their walls, eliminating any intruder without exception.

He didn't know whether this town was one of those.

He shook off the manifestation of anxiety that had suddenly formed within his heart.

He could not turn back anymore. He had to buy boss' words and fully believe that it was a lively town.

He felt the girl's cheek, which turned out to be extremely hot. The gel sheet wasn't of much use. He absolutely had to find a doctor, or, in the worst case, at least get hold of medicaments.

He would reach the entrance in a few minutes' time after starting the engine once again.

However, what waited for him right at the entrance was an obstacle that surpassed his expectations... no, to be exact, it was "obstacles".

"...What the heck...," he muttered, flabbergasted.

With good reason! The number of buildings had finally started to increase when he had entered the town. However, in the middle of the street he found a light bus that had been overturned sideways. Two of them.

Whatever way one looked at this scene, this wasn't natural. The two buses were tightly obstructing two traffic lanes each, and from the gap between them and the sidewalks poked some minivans, completely blocking the way.

All gaps had been piled with sandbags and the buses were even filled with those. This was no doubt a barricade to ward off intruders.

The fact that there was a barricade—a means of fending off forceful invasions—meant that they didn't welcome wicked people.

"...Shit...!"

Most likely, this had been built in fear of looting. The height of the barricade could easily be overcome if one had something to stand on, but its purpose was to hinder cars and motorcycles from entering. Plunderers only take the offensive when they clearly have the advantage.

Probably, the townspeople had presumed that such outlaws wouldn't have the courage to intrude a town that seemed to have a vigilante group.

However, that meant that he couldn't go any farther with Cubby. However excellent a motorbike Cubby was, it could never leap over a overthrown minibus. There was no way around proceeding by foot. He had to overcome this accursed barricade with his own two legs and search for a doctor.

Having made a decision, there was no reason anymore to flinch. He untied the rope that had bound the girl to him and gave her a piggyback.

It was rather tough to climb onto one of the buses with one free hand, but it was the right decision. Thanks to the fact that he was on a higher ground, he could well recognize the traps that had been laid out everywhere. One met with a mine field of pitfalls and steel traps if one tried to go around the buildings. Furthermore, for the improbable case that someone managed to break through the barricade, there was a huge hole behind it that could swallow several cars.

The intruders were meant to fall in there if they broke through forcefully. It was also effective against humans who carelessly climbed over the barricade—and they could consider themselves lucky if they only broke a few bones. It were nasty traps indeed.

The more he proceeded in the direction he assumed the center to be, the more the number of cars decreased. " Assumed", because he was groping his way based only on the broadness of the street and the atmosphere of the townscape, since the names of the places had entirely disappeared from the signposts and boards.

The number of cars that had been illegally parked, no, "abandoned", on the street became almost zero after he had gone past one traffic light.

He didn't know whether they had been moved somewhere else because they were in the way or because they could be used for something, but it was clear that this town was governed by humans. And apparently quite organized: when he sneaked a peek at the shelves of the shops, he noticed that they had all been taken somewhere. However, there were no signs of plunder. Someone had probably transported them systematically.

There was still no soul, but carrying someone on one's back consumes more energy than one might think. The difference of their weight summed up to about six kilograms, which still meant that his legs had to sustain almost twice as much as usually.

Having steered his bike for a long time in the pouring rain, his steps had gradually become painful.

On top of that, his arms and legs had grown almost numb from the elbows and knees because of his low body temperature. Due to this, the scratches on the back of his feet had abated to a dull pain. The fact that his sense of balance was starting to suffer, however, was very bad. If he fell down now, he would not be able to stand up anymore.

When sped up, bracing his wavering will and body, his field of view suddenly broadened and a large school came in sight.

It was probably a high school. It had been months since he last saw this peculiar kind of institution.

As was characteristic for schools with too much land, the school grounds were very broad. He couldn't spot

anyone outside, but the light was switched on in several rooms of the school.

Perhaps, evacuates lived there. Schools were a common refuge. Besides, those lights were no doubt of electric nature.

"Mh?"

There was someone. At the entrance of the gym neighboring the school building, there was a man.

He squinted his eyes and carefully made sure whether he was friend or fiend.

He was probably somewhere between his late twenties or his early thirties. He was standing upright under the eaves of the gym in a suit.

He didn't seem to be carrying a weapon and at least looked all right.

Deciding on asking him about the whereabouts of a doctor, the boy approached the school gate.

But the moment he was about to pass through the gate, he started to waver.

Was it really safe to leisurely walk in there? Wouldn't it be better to hide her somewhere and negotiate on his own?

He shook his head and chased these sudden negative thoughts away.

It was of no avail to harvest such doubts now. If he was attacked, he would be lost anyway, even if he managed to knock out one or two of a lot. Fighting his way back through to the barricade while carrying a sick girl was impossible. In the first place, he wouldn't even reach the warehouse with the remaining fuel.

This time he had no choice but to confide in his tough luck and her strong luck.

After making sure she was sitting firm on his back, he passed through the open gate and walked straight through the school grounds towards the gym.

"Hey there! Excuse me!"

When he started to yell, the man instantly gave him a look. From close up, the boy noticed that he was facing a

quite large man that was about 20 centimeters taller than him. The man wore a well-tailored suit with a neatly tied tie. It was a pretty handsome guy, so to speak, wearing a short haircut that suited him well. His inner alarm bell reacted to that rather showy appearance, but it was too late to turn back.

The man, however, while rounding his eyes, didn't make a move.

After clicking his tongue in his mind, he started walking towards him once more.

After a ten seconds' mystification, the man finally realized what situation the two were in and trotted to them. He didn't seem to care about the rain.

"What's the matter?"

"Um... this girl is feeling unwell... is there a doctor around?"

While firming his hold on the girl who was about to slide down, he prayed that there was one.

"...So you want a doctor to take a look at her? I sure hope you brought your insurance card with you?"

"What?"

"Don't get me wrong. I am not talking about the card that verifies that you are member of a medical-care insurance. It's something that proves that you own enough to make up for medical treatment."

The muscles of the boy's cheeks almost twitched.

"...in other words, I must offer something of equal value?"

"You can't be thinking to get a doctor for free these days, right?"

The indifferent voice the man spoke in got the boy's hackles up. The only reason why he didn't beat him up right now was that he couldn't use his hands because he was sustaining the girl.

"...a Super Cub in good order and condition, enough water for a grown-up man to survive for four days, provisions to get through one week, and two sets of general goods. Take whatever you want!"

"Heh, now that sounds extravagant. But these are your legs and meal, right? How do you plan on getting by without all that?"

"I'll think about that when she's well again," he said as he glared at the man.

The nonchalant man put on a grin and looked down at him, "What if that wasn't enough?"

"I'd bite the bullet and, after having her treated, I'd take revenge."

"Whoa whoa! Do you want to make the whole town your enemy or what?" he laughed baffledly.

However, the boy kicked off that laugh with his scowl.

"If needed."

"...Oh?"

The man flashed a smile. Not a ridiculing one like before, but a small, interested smile.

"I may not be Superman, but if it's for her sake, I'm ready to become a fiendish criminal anytime."

"...I see. Fine!"

The man was smiling all over the face. Even though the shape of his smile hadn't changed, the boy somehow couldn't sense any ill-will nor sarcasm.

"For starters, let's carry her into the school."

"Huh? ...No, I need a doctor right now..."

"I'm in charge of health education here, you know. So I'm sort of a doctor. Follow me, I'll lead you to the infirmary."

The boy was left completely dumbfounded as he listened to him.

"But what about your compensation and that stuff..."

"Idle talk. Just wanted to see how you'd answer me. Now come on, get her over here."

After standing there thunderstruck for a moment, he followed the trotting man with great difficulty through the rain, towards the school building.

A few minutes later and after the skillful treatment of the man, the girl was lying on a bed in the school infirmary. Her face looked much healthier now, which was probably due to the antipyretic injection he had given her .

"...You really saved us... Thank you so much," the boy said as he lowered his head.

The man, however, laughed in response, "No problem, boy. You're only grossing me out if you act so polite after barking at me a few moments ago."

He had slid into a white coat and put on silver-rimmed glasses. There had been no trace earlier, but in these

clothes, he indeed looked like was in charge of the infirmary. Save for his sports teacher-like sturdy build, that is.

"How is the girl?"

The man raised his eyebrow slightly, apparently wondering about how the boy addressed his companion, and sat down on his chair.

"Hm... most likely she caught a cold while her body was weakened because she had her periods. Judging by the symptoms, it's just a normal cold. Well, you did quite well with your treatment, so she'll be up and about again with some rest."

"...I don't know if you can call that 'treatment'. I just cooled her forehead and wrapped her up warm, after all. Even worse, I carried her through the pouring rain."

"That's just about right, you know. Some people, when they're confronted with a cold, just stuff their patients with antipyretics, then with anti-diarrheal medicine, then with headache pills and so forth... Besides, her fever *was* certainly rather high. If you stayed there, she might have gotten ill with pneumonia. It was the right choice to carry her here."

With these words, the man stood up.

"Okay, I'll go get some new ice. Can you take care of the wet towel while I'm away?"

"Yes. Much obliged."

"...Seriously, stop acting so polite," he smirked and left the infirmary after sliding the door open.

After making a few steps into the empty corridor, he turned to the light that leaked from the infirmary.

"...Heh. To test a patient. Looks like these days have made me worse a person than expected."

Without being heard by anyone, his quiet whisper vanished in the dim, lonely corridor.

He squeezed the hand towel hard and put it on her forehead.

There was some ice in the washtub, which, while only small in quantity, was clearly superior to rain water. Some color had returned into her face, and her breath had gotten calm as well.

Finally taking a breath, he looked around in the room, and sat down besides the girl on the bed.

This was no doubt an infirmary. From how it looked inside, he could tell that it still functioned and was used as one.

There was a desk and a shelf filled with medicaments and three cots equipped with curtains. Of the two remaining beds, one was piled with cardboard boxes, and the other had its curtains shut. Perhaps, there was another patient.

When coming to this room, they had taken the main entrance. To his surprise, however, the corridors hadn't been dusty at all.

The shelf there wasn't any different: while it was apparent that the stock of medicaments had decreased, there were no signs of neglect.

He had no idea how many students were still in this school, but it was highly doubtful if that number was high enough to keep on holding classes. Thus the closest possible explanation was that the building was being used as a shelter for evacuees.

Truth to be told, the boy didn't trust the man very much.

He didn't really doubt whether the man *was* in charge of the infirmary or not, as his treatment had been to-the-point and his use of the equipment deft, but he didn't know if the man split on them.

Perhaps, he had only shammed getting them some ice and was in fact going to come back with a group of hard-boiled thugs armed with spike rods.

What raised the most doubt was the questioning when they met. A doctor in his normal state of mind would have never done anything of that sort—all the less when it was apparent that the boy was carrying a sick person.

At any rate, the boy was determined to stay on guard.

During the first ten minutes, at least.

"Oh...?" the man rounded his eyes as he came back holding a cooler.

During the time he had been away, the boy had apparently neglected his assigned task of looking after the girl and had fallen asleep on his chair with his head laid on the girl's bed.

He put the box on the ground and tried softly shaking the boy's shoulders. However, even when he shook a little stronger, the boy showed no signs of waking up.

The man couldn't leave him like that or he was in for a cold as well. That said, it was also a fact, however, that the boy had gone to great lengths to carry the girl here. It was only natural that he was tired. The man couldn't bring himself to wake him.

He tried dragging him off the chair. "Err, what to do now?" he wondered. He could hardly let him lie there like the victim of a killer.

"Hmm," he muttered and moved his gaze towards the neighboring bed, where he, however, only saw what he

expected see: a pile of cardboard boxes that was akin to the Tower of Babel, stuffed with medicines he had gotten from the nearby general hospital.

In the first place, this infirmary was basically his clinic and where he was when on night duty, so the bed the girl was sleeping on had been left empty only because he used it for his naps.

Reflecting on his rather sloppy lifestyle, he let out a sigh.

Anyway, it was impossible to put away all those cardboard boxes now. Hence, there was only one way to go about it.

"...Heave...ho...!"

The man grabbed the boy by the collar and lifted him onto the girl's bed. He then made him lie happily beside her and put the blanket over both of them—when he suddenly remembered that she was in her underwear, as he had taken off her clothes because they were drenched.

However, he didn't bother to care, thinking that they were a couple anyway.

At once, she woke up.

Apparently having gotten a lot of sleep, she was not drowsy at all.

As she hadn't had a dream, either, it didn't really seem to her as though any time had passed. The fact that her consciousness had been hazy before falling asleep, left her in utter confusion about the situation.

In her field of vision she found the white light of a fluorescent lamp—the first in a while—and an unfamiliar white ceiling. Unless her brain had rotten due to excessive sleep, she hadn't seen this ceiling before.

"...Um... where...are we?" she was about to ask the boy, but he was not there.

She had assumed that he was by her side like always, but unfortunately, the bed next to hers held only a mountain of cardboard boxes and no boy.

With a weak sigh, she turned over.

And spotted him.

His sleeping face occupied her entire vision, and before she knew it, she had gazed at it for several seconds.

Uwaa... he has pretty long eyelashes even though he's a man ! He always looks a little dull, but now that he's sleeping and from close up, he really has a baby-face; jeez, why does he have such full lips! I'd love to ask for the secret of his beauty, but somehow that feels just wrong to do for a girl, and anyway, I strongly hope he hasn't done anything to me———

For a split second, she forgot herself and was on the verge of becoming delighted with his face. Regaining her rationality, which had darted off into the world of dreams, she started calmly analyzing the situation she was in.

Evidently, she was in some building. The boy had probably taken her to a hospital because he had worried about her. Chances were that this was the "neighboring town" they had been headed to.

Meaning that she had been laid on this bed to sleep. She got that.

But *why* was he sleeping together with her?

She couldn't keep herself from blushing upon saying those words in her mind. They were sleeping together. In the same bed! In a little more neutral words, they were sharing a bed. But the problem was not how to call it.

Considering that he was still tidily wearing his clothes, she knew only too well that he hadn't made a "slip", but still, they were sleeping together!

On top of that, she was left there in her underwear for some unknown reason, exposing her skin, and still wearing her socks in spite of that, making her clothing look extremely fetishistic.

At this very moment, the girl found herself confronted with two choices. Either approve of this situation and keep on sleeping together, or disapprove of it and raise a scream.

What will you do, me? What will you do, girl? Such a chance isn't going to come again. But it's still too early! What should I do? Am I supposed to plant a kiss at least, as a

preparation for the future? Or should I go straight to the max

———

She was about to get a fever again because of wavering and wavering, when the boy suddenly moved sluggishly .

"Mh... oh...? Girl...?"

To her chagrin, her fist was faster than her head. *I'm sorry, boy.*

"Phgh!!"

"Whoa?!"

Surprised at the boy who came flying off the bed like an aircraft from its carrier, the man almost dropped the tub he was holding. He had been within a hair's breadth of dashing the freshly-recovered girl with ice-cold water.

"You're a patient for crying out loud! Stay in bed!"

"Y-Yes!"

She had no idea who he was, but still the girl reflexively obeyed his rebuke as he wore a white coat.

Only after putting her head on the pillow again and hiding half her face under her blanket, she carefully sneaked a peek at the man in a white coat.

"Um... may I ask where I am?"

The man put the tug on the washstand and gave her a smile.

"Your in the infirmary a nameless doctor of a nameless high school in a nameless town is in charge of."

"...So he really transported me here..."

"Quite so. You've gotten yourself a pretty reliable boyfriend: it seems like he went over hedge and ditch carrying you."

"He's not my boyfriend!!"

The objection of the tomato-red girl made the man round his eyes.

"He's not?"

"He's not!"

Seeing her answer like a shot again, he compared the girl on the bed and the boy who had sunk to the ground.

"...Oh, I'm sorry then. You looked just like a couple, so I was sure you were. So I suppose it was not so good to have you sleep in the same bed?"

"...I think it's questionable letting a healthy person sleep next to a sick one in the first place," she reproached with red cheeks.

The man, however, did not consider himself at fault at all.

"...Well, seems like you're well and sound, so don't mind it. That aside, that kid down there's not moving anymore."

"...Eh? Did I go too far by any chance?"

She got off the bed and turned over the boy who had plunged to the ground moments ago.

Having gotten a punch straight into the face, he had been KOed at a single blow and lay there without consciousness but with a bleeding red nose.

The one and only thing he could probably consider himself lucky of was the fact that this was an infirmary.

The result of the examination was a contusion and a cerebral concussion. According to what the boy was told, the man had mistaken them for lovers and stuffed him into one bed with the girl, giving him the pleasure of making the acquaintance of her iron fist. It was a real bother. As terrible as it gets. Why o why didn't he wake up before her?

"...Oh well, great to see you well up again. Really."

"Um, well, sorry...?"

The boy, who looked quite moody, tossed the tissue in his nose into the bin.

At first, the tissues were bright red, but the blood seemed to have stopped as he exchanged them.

"Don't mind it. Think of it as a worth-while experience, " he chuckled.

The boy gave him a stare.

"I absolutely don't want to hear that from the one who's the cause... I'm fine, really. I've gotten used to her punches."

"I-I'm not always turning violent like that!"

"Yeah yeah."

He neither denied nor asserted her claim. Matters of this type are often remembered by the victims and cleanly forgotten by the culprits.

"Anyway, little princess?"

"Yes?!"

She straightened herself when he turned on her. "Little princess" didn't suit her at all, she thought, but she deliberately kept quiet about it.

"Your fever has mostly recovered and so have your menstrual pains, I should think, so you can be relieved for now. However, since there's danger of a relapse, stay here until tomorrow."

"Yes, understood. Is it okay if he stays here as well?"

"Should be no problem. But the bed's piled right now, so help me get those boxes off!" the man grinned.

The boy gazed at the mountain of cardboard boxes the bed was buried under and slouched his shoulders.

"A compensation of equal value, I guess...?" the boy muttered. To his surprise, however, the answer was not affirming.

"Quit joking! I'll have you pay me your treatment on another occasion. This little bit of work barely makes your room rate."

The two travelers exchanged glances.

"Let me warn you: I'm not cheap, you know? There are comparatively many doctors in this town, but unfortunately, my prices are especially high."

The two shrieked inside.

"Ah, and call me 'doc', okay? First, let's get you into some fresh clothes. I brought you some which should be more or less about your sizes."

A pajama for women, and a t-shirt and a pair of jeans for men were laid on the bed.

"You're done changing?"

"Yeah."

Behind the curtain that then opened was the girl, wearing a white pajama with blue stripes.

Having relaxed, she looked a little more like she was sickly than before.

As almost all of their clothes had gotten unwearable, the boy had had no other choice but to follow doc either, and had reluctantly borrowed some clothes from him. The jeans appeared to be brand-new, so they were fine and dandy, but the black T-shirt with a forceful white print on it got him rather bothered. On the front it said " Straight from Hell" and on the back "Children of Anarchy ". He didn't count himself among some dense biker gang, after all. He could clearly sense the ill will of that obnoxious doctor, but he was not in the position of being picky.

"Just stay in bed until you feel better. It seems we'll get some of their provisions and water, so you can be at ease. "

"Okay. Thanks."

The girl let herself fall on the bed and covered herself with a blanket up to her mouth. Finding her doing this sort of lovely, he couldn't help smiling. As she seemed to perceive his delight, her cheeks ended up turning red.

"Boy...?"

"Hm?"

The girl turned over, away from him.

"...Thanks for everything."

He reached out his hand and stroked her head.

"...You're welcome..."

After having a late breakfast with the girl and calming down a bit, the boy began stowing away the cardboard boxes together with doc.

Apparently, those boxes were filled with medical goods from some hospital. That Mount Everest seemed like a really stiff piece of work.

To begin with, one needed a stepladder to even get those boxes down! He didn't have enough capacities to care about their contents.

Suddenly, a shiny tiny tip poked through the cardboard box the boy was carrying.

"Whoa, doc! What the heck is this?! It's a needle! There's a needle!"

"Ah yeah, that's syringe needles you're holding there. Hospital waste, you know. I should definitely dispose of them later."

"Please don't leave such stuff behind like that! What would you do if I accidentally stuck myself with one?!"

"Don't worry. I've got disinfectants by the ton."

"You're missing the point!" he objected desperately and put the box that contained used syringe needles on the ground.

By now, there was next to no free space left on the ground of the infirmary. They were forced to put the boxes in order. They had already tried piling them up on the corridor outside, which looked however as though they were being investigated by some police troup.

Unable to bear it longer, the girl poked out her face from the bed and asked, "Hey, do you need my help?"

However, her goodwill was immediately kicked off.

"Be a good patient and shut up! You would only be in the way. You look clumsy, after all."

"Wha...?! What was that?! Don't determine the skills of someone you just met by his looks! I'm very well able to do some simple clean—" she began and bumped her hand full-speed into the tub on the washstand. The water in the tub, which was splendidly cold thanks to the ice in it, rained down on the boy with a stunning precision.

"Err... you did well, yeah. You can take a break now. The remaining tasks can only be done by a doctor anyway."

Still drenched, the boy was sent out of the building like a stray dog.

It was such beautiful weather that the pouring rain the previous night seemed like a lie. The clear sky, now freed from all pollution, was filled with a vivid blue and there was not a cloud to be seen. He felt great gazing at it—except for the fact that he looked like a drowned rat.

"I guess it wouldn't have made a great difference if I had waited until the next morning before taking her here. .," he unconsciously whispered to himself with a smile.

Well, in that case he would have had the pleasure of carrying her all the way under the blazing sun. That would have been just as much of a pain, or so he had to convince himself.

The sun burned his skin with its hot beams and started to dry his soaked clothes. In the end and with the help of his own body temperature, his clothes were pretty much

dry even before enough time had passed to call it a break .

Suddenly, a familiar object behind him struck his eye.

It was their silver Super Cub, which he had left behind at the barricade the previous evening.

"What's that doing here...? Did he go collect it for us?"

Cubby couldn't possibly have come here on its own. While that was certainly a funny thing to picture, it was more than improbable that their excellent yet normal Super Cub had such an autopilot function.

"Hey, brat."

"Yes?"

He turned to doc as he had heard his voice. *Not that I care, but is that my new name?* The doctor didn't seem to have any ill will, but he couldn't help but feel a little offended.

"I'm pretty much done preparing your bed. You can go and fetch your futon now. It's in the dressmaking room in the third floor. To reach it... well, see for yourself. You should find it."

"Understood. Where's the..."

"Key," he wanted to continue, but the keys came flying before he could even finish. A cheap plastic name card was attached to them.

"As soon as you've done that, it's lunch time. ...well, I won't serve anything extravagant, though."

"Eh, not *you can't*?"

"No, I *won't*. After all, your debt is growing and growing at the moment, isn't it?" he said and chuckled aloud. The boy got the chills. "For one thing, it was me who arranged the collection of your bike, and for another thing I've still not gotten my payment for her treatment... Oh let's see—what kind of payment should I demand from you..."

To the boy it looked as though doc's broad grin reached up to his ears. A devil's tail growing from his bottom was of course also included in this image.

"Ghwaa...aahm..."

At the very moment, the girl's mouth was opened more than a 45° due to a full-power yawn. While opening the mouth so largely without care brings with it the danger of dislocating one's jaw, yawning is a physiological phenomenon that can be observed in most mammals. Being not exactly dignified in general, she couldn't be expected to suppress it.

In other words, the girl was bored.

Everyone who has ever had to stay home because of a cold should understand this. The more you recover from illnesses like a cold, the more boring they get. Though you are in the course of regaining your condition, the doctor doesn't permit you to go out of bed — and due to the nature of mankind, it's inevitable that a rebellious spirit emerges that makes you want to cut and run if that doctor's not around.

She slipped into the sneakers by her bed and ran off.

Of course, she didn't intend to leave the town. All she wanted to do was getting a breath of fresh air———

"Excuse me..."

Therefore, she could pretty much see her heart shoot out of her mouth when she suddenly heard an unfamiliar voice from the room in which there was supposed to be no one else.

Was she so stricken that she heard things? Searching for a place in the infirmary where one could hide... she found one: the third bed, directly before her eyes by the window.

The girl hesitatingly raised her face.

"Um, excuse me," the voice said, upon which the curtain was slid open.

The girl took a leap backward. She bumped her calves against the edge of the bed behind her and tumbled over it, but fell down on the other side without finishing a turn.

A whang resounded as though a wrestler had just gone down, and in the next moment the door opened.

The doctor and boy entered and rounded there eyes, just to narrow them a second later.

"...what're you doing?"

"Um... well...," she tried to explain, but it was of no avail. Words could not describe why she would get in the situation of doing a headstand in pajama and sneakers with her back leaned against the bed.

"Excuse me... I have been sound asleep until just now," said a girl about the same age as the girl while bowing.

"No, excuse *me* for being so noisy."

The unfamiliar girl had been sleeping in the bed with closed curtains. Apparently, the boy's arrival was news to her, too, because she had been asleep all the time since the previous night.

"No no, the livelier the better," she laughed.

She was near the terminal stage.

Her skin and hair were snow white—whiter than an albino's. Since suffering from "the vanishing" did not mean getting bad blood or something, but rather that one's entire color itself faded, she did not really seem unhealthy. Her white skin made her look almost like a fairy.

As a Japanese, her eyes should have been either black or a dark brown, but hers were a lightish ashen gray. Without a doubt these were the symptoms of the terminal stages of "the vanishing".

She hadn't completely turned monochrome yet, but there was probably not much time left until she would. While the speed of the illness' progress was said to not necessarily be constant and depend on the individual, it was safe to say that her remaining time didn't sum up to very much.

"Well, I guess I'll introduce her to you," the doctor said as he stood next to her, "This little beauty is a student of this school. She pretty much lives here because she's in delicate health."

The girl in question made a bow in a slightly embarrassed manner, which, however, was truly graceful and fitted the image of an unfortunate beauty.

"Her age should be about yours; sixteen. We call her..."

"...Doctor...!"

She tugged at his white coat and protested to him in whispers with blushed cheeks. Seeing how desperate she seemed, the boy and girl exchanged glances.

"...Come on, that's not something you can hide. Nor is it something to think about. Okay, um... listen, her nickname is 'princess'."

"Princess?" *the* girl asked back in surprise.

The girl that had been called "princess" ducked her head and lowered her gaze with a bright red face. Indeed , it seemed to be the perfect nickname for her. She really looked like a princess.

"...I-I do not like that name because it is so embarrassing, but doctor just won't listen and keeps calling me "princess, princess". Because of him, everyone in town is calling me like that now..."

"But it's a perfect match," the boy said. With a natural smile that put the girl out.

You'd better not be hitting on her willingly, you player!

"Excuse me...," princess murmured toward the girl.

"Hm?" the girl asked as she glanced to her.

"Excuse me... but may I know your names? It is not fair if it is only me..."

"I see. You're right. I'm the 'girl'!"

"Quite similarly, I'm the 'boy'. Pleased to meet you, your highness!"

He once more gave a sweet smile. This time the girl unleashed her iron elbow attack — straight into his side.

By the time their group, which had now grown to four members, had a light lunch of some rolls and a seaweed salad, the girl was almost alive and kicking again. What remained was to regain some strength in her legs, which had become weak due to her cold.

One must not forget that she was quite the athlete and fighter though she looked like a corpse the day before. Getting completely healthy until tomorrow was going to be a pushover for her.

"Alright, brat. It's time for you to work," the doctor said as he stood up from a cheap-looking stool.

While putting down the aluminum plate that had been in the school's stock on the plate, the boy sighed in his mind. He was slowly getting used to that self-righteous attitude.

"Princess takes to taking a stroll in the afternoon town, you know. Sadly, I do have the incredibly boring but very important task of attending a gathering in the hospital."

"D-Doctor...," princess objected apologetically, but he ignored her.

"Therefore, boy, you're her escort today. Feel free to sight-see the town while you're at it."

"Hey doc! What about me?!" the girl objected.

The doctor thrust out his index finger before her, " You're forbidden to go outside. Therefore, I'll take those into custody." He then held up a paper bag that contained the clothes she had worn when she arrived, as well as her sneakers.

"Wha—When did you...?!"

She immediately attempted to snatch them back, but he dodged her.

"Okay, you know what to do. Don't worry, I'll be back in the early evening." He gave them a quick wave and left like the wind.

Left behind in the room was a bewildered boy and girl, and a flushed princess with her gaze pinned to the floor.

In the end, the boy accepted to escort princess and left with her for a stroll in town. The delicate princess used a wheelchair to move, hence and luckily he didn't end up having to walk hand in hand.

This did not calm the girl's wrath in the least, though, and she had glared at him like a horned beast from hell.

"Um... I am really, really sorry. We can return anytime if you are bothered..."

"Hm? Don't worry. I owe that doctor one, and most of all, it's too late to stop the girl from erupting," he answered with conviction as he pushed the wheelchair.

A bright sun that shone just as fiercely as ever welcomed them when they left the building.

He pushed her down a concrete ramp that had only been built recently as it seemed and proceeded without haste through the muddy school grounds.

"Do you need a sunshade?"

"Not yet, thanks."

"Okay," he said and dropped the subject.

To the boy's understanding, sufferers from albinism—a congenital disorder that results from inheritance of recessive gene alleles—were very sensitive to ultraviolet rays due to an insufficient amount of melanin in the skin.

Much different, the loss of color when suffering from *"the vanishing"* was not because of a lack of melanin. The melanin itself would simply become colorless, thus her defense against ultraviolet rays was about the same as the boy's, even though she had turned almost entirely white.

Since, however, direct sunlight *could* not be good for her, suffering from a weak heart, he had taken a sunshade with him just in case.

"Where is our first stop, Princess?"

"I-I really do not want to be a bother, so we can go back if you..."

"Don't say that. It's a great opportunity for me to take a look around in town, so please be my guide."

Princess looked up at the smile on his face.

"...Yes! Leave that to me!"

She beamed with joy.

"Haha! To think that my tour guide is a prince—," he started, but stopped mid-sentence because he sensed someone's dreadful anger in his back.

For some reason, he was under the impression that an aura of wrath was leaking through the gaps between the curtains of a certain room in the school behind them.

"U-Um... well, let's just get moving for now!"

"H-Huh?"

The boy started to push the wheelchair at a rather quick pace, whereas Princess, a little bewildered, started talking about the town.

Meanwhile at the infirmary.

"UGAAA!!"

With a weird yell, the girl jumped from the bed.

Outrageous! It's downright outrageous! Why did things take this turn?

Being the unconscious lady killer the boy was, he was bound to have hit on Princess countless times already without even realizing. This was not just a wild guess, it was an attribute particular to his very existence.

...At least that's the effect he had on her, anyway.

"A delicate princess, huh", she thought, "I didn't see this coming...!"

She had been completely taken by surprise by the appearance of a new challenger who came with such an utterly girlish personality, which she could imagine herself to be like not in her wildest dreams nor anywhere else.

Well, of course this wouldn't even have happened if she hadn't passed out after catching a cold.

As she realized that she was at fault for this situation, she was left with only one way out: preventing any further love-comedy from happening. However, since she had been bereft of her everyday clothes and shoes, her equipment consisted solely of the pajama she was wearing. Even in role playing games, the player usually starts with something along the lines of SIMPLE CLOTHES, a WOODEN CLUB and a PAIR OF SANDALS. Besides, bold though she was, her shame didn't allow her to go outside with just a PAJAMA.

"Eww... I have to stop the romance & comedy course this is taking...!"

Searching for something helpful, she looked around in the room.

She found the white coat of that nasty school doctor on the back of the chair before his desk.

"...well, should do, I guess?"

She put it on only reluctantly, but she quite liked it actually as soon as she wore it. Being long and having buttons, it looked miles better than a pajama at a glance.

"Leaves only the shoes..."

Unfortunately, it was not as easy to find something like that. It wasn't common to take off one's shoes at school, after all. According to doc, there were people staying in the classrooms, but as an escapee, she would have rather not approached inhabited zones. On the other hand, while the linoleum flooring of the infirmary was no real problem, she didn't want to walk her feet wound on asphalt either.

After wandering about in school back and forth, she found a pair of sandals in the restroom of the gym. Since there were no other options, she chose to use them.

Leaving aside the WOODEN CLUB, which was not needed, she had succeeded in equipping a NASTY WHITE COAT, a PAJAMA and a pair of RESTROOM SANDALS.

She trotted off in high spirits and out of the school building — where she found someone she knew only too well.

"Oh, it's Cubby!"

It was without doubt their silver guardian angel, their Super Cub.

The boy could hardly have collected it, considering the timing, so she suspected the nasty school doctor might have done it.

The drenched luggage had been extended on the ground before the entrance and was being dried in the sun along with Cubby itself.

Now that she came to think of it, about a fourth of her recovery was thanks to Cubby because she would not even have reached this town without its swift feet.

Having run full throttle for half a day and been exposed to a driving rain a whole day, its silver paint was stained with dirt and muddy water.

She was suddenly overcome by a kind of sentimentality that was hard to put into words.

"...All right! You deserve a nice wash!"

Cubby's repair and maintenance was the boy's job, but she was confident to be able to wash a motorbike even by herself.

While breathing wildly through her nose, she looked through the flower beds and skillfully discovered a rubber hose and a water tap. Schools are strange institutions that make their users and customers, the students, do the cleaning, therefore she unearthed a basket and a rag in no time as well. For whatever reason, there was even car wax.

Her original objective for escaping had completely slipped her mind.

"Howdy! Not with the doctor today, princess?"

"Y-Yes. Have a nice day."

"Sure! Hey youngster, look after her, okay?"

"Yes. Just leave it to me."

They were being greeting every now and then while walking. Boss' words that it was "lively" in this town had proven to be true, or maybe it had even gotten livelier compared to the time boss was there.

The residential areas, amusement facilities and so forth had been abandoned, and most of the inhabitants had moved to the school and other large public facilities. Apparently, it was easier this way to keep track of the number of vanished people and to keep the town intact.

Unable to continue business, most of the shopping street had been closed. According to Princess, the groceries and fish shops in town had either been closed too or were only used for their equipment because there was no need to distribute foodstuff through them. The

doors to stationery shops and book stores were wide open, welcoming anyone who was in need of something.

"But still...," the boy thought and said, "You sure are popular, Princess, aren't you?"

"Y-You must be wrong...," she tried to deny it while blushing, but considering that absolutely everyone they had met so far had greeted and teased her, there was virtually no persuasiveness in her words.

"It is just that I like to take strolls..."

"I see. In other words, you're the idol of this town."

"Idol..."

He thought he had heard a gloomy tone in her voice for a split-second, but when he looked at her, she was smiling just like before.

They had come down a long and straight slope and reached the place that was sort of this town's market, where the goods from the hill and the catches of fish from the sea were exchanged or distributed. Since the time of the fish market, which was a rebuilt harbor storehouse, was a little displaced, there weren't so much

people there. But still, he hadn't seen such a concentration of people in months.

"Excuse me, boy, but would you like to see the sea?"

"The sea?"

"Yes. Since this is a harbor town, you can even go to the shoreline!"

"Sounds cool. Maybe I should go for a swim while I'm at it?"

"You should not underestimate our shores, or the next time you reach this town it will be as a drowned body."

"Eh?" he contorted his face.

"The water does not get that warm even in summer and the tides are very fast. There are no bathing places, either."

"...I'll keep that in mind."

While pushing the wheelchair, the boy swore to himself to refuse whatever it takes if the girl begged him to bath in the sea.

After he had kept walking down the town, one large hill, for fifteen minutes while following her guidance, the dark blue sea that he had seen vaguely from afar was right before his eyes.

It was a not-so-large fishing port with a couple of fishing boats floating on the waters and a lighthouse towering up at the side. An ocean breeze tickled their nose and made their hair sway.

In front of their eyes the boundless sea.

"It's really broad..."

"The sea?"

"No, this island. I was born and raised in the capital, you know. Just can't get used to this."

"Eh...? Correct me if I am wrong, but did you come all the way from the capital?"

"We did, yeah. It took us about three months, though."

"Together with the girl?"

"Together with her, yeah."

Very surprised apparently, Princess rounded her eyes.

"Such a long time... such a long distance..."

"Well, if we hadn't had our bike, we would have been roasted before even leaving the main island," he laughed.

"Packing all your luggage on your motorcycle?"

"Yeah. We brought with us some blankets to sleep, food and water. And of course clothes and everyday goods. We would for sure be as flat as a pancake without our Super Cub."

"Cub?"

"Ah, I guess that name conveys nothing to you? It's the name of a type of motorized bicycle that's often used for tasks like newspaper delivery or pizza delivery."

"Cubby-chan, right? What a cute name!"

At last, "Cubby" was promoted to "Cubby-chan". This was only fair, though, considering that they had been kind of promoted, too, being treated very kindly. "The next stage would be 'Cubby-tan', I suppose?" he day-dreamed meaninglessly.

"Leaving undecided whether it's cute or not, I can vouch that it's a tough vehicle! Since it was built for doing tasks, it's solid and can hold a lot of heavy stuff."

"A true worker, isn't it?"

"Indeed. And it hardly ever gets damaged."

"...Would you mind giving me a ride once later?"

Princess' beg caused him to shut his mouth at once.

"Well..."

"Eh?"

All of a sudden, a fierce gust of wind cut the boy short. They quickly closed their eyes and looked the way the wind was blowing.

The sudden gust went past them in moments and left behind a silence between them.

"...Looks like the wind has gotten stronger. Shall we head home?"

"...Yes, that is a good idea."

Without responding to her prior question, the boy started to push the wheelchair.

Looking up the slope they had come down, he spotted a dot that was the school the girl was at.

Meanwhile, the situation the girl was in.

"Oooh, grandpa! Don't hit on a girl that could be your grandchild!"

"No no, but you're quite a—***UGHH***?!"

"M-Missy! If you hit his back so hard, he'll get a heart attack again!"

"Oh? You can leave the resuscitation to me if that happens," the girl said.

"**What?!** You get to enjoy a mouth-to-mouth resuscitation by her?! Quick, I have to stop my heart whatever it takes!"

"You'd rather not, old boy. At our age, you'd bite the dust before her lips can even touch you. It won't be long until we'll cross the river. After all, there are more old geezers here than helpers. "

"Ha! I've been getting and turning down invitations to hell since I was in the war, and I still live at this age. Clinging to life for a few more seconds is a piece of cake!"

Without her noticing, the bike-washing girl had turned into the idol of the old people that lived at the school.

But, suddenly, along with a dull noise a bottle hit the back of her head.

Because she hadn't expected such a blow at all, she crouched down and rubbed her head. The person she found when turning around while writhing with pain that echoed within her skull was, as she suspected, the tall school doctor.

"Man!! What're you doing, you nasty doc?!"

"Oh shut up! Why can't you even listen to simple orders and lie in bed as you're told to?! You're not in

kindergarten anymore, you know? Just how hare-brained are you?!" the doctor yelled with a bottle in his right hand and a leather suitcase in his left hand.

Incidentally, the content of the bottle appeared to be real Japanese *sake*. Even if he had restrained himself, what if he had broken it?

"Who's hare-brained?! I just... I just thought I'd thank Cubby by... by giving it a wash..."

"What...?"

He glanced at the Super Cub, which was indeed shining with soap and water. Compared with the dirty bike he saw that morning, it looked like a brand-new machine. Its body had been waxed and the oil-stained parts of the engine had been cleaned as well. Even the tires had been polished, making it really look like it had been born again.

"What the... you don't usually wash a car when you haven't even recovered completely, do you? What if you have a relapse because of getting cold hands and feet?"

"I won't. I have recovered already, and I don't want to stay in bed forever. It would pain my heart wasting my youth like that!"

"...Jeez. You, too, old guys... Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? You could be my fathers for crying out loud...," he said while giving the group of old men a weak reproaching glance.

The men, however, did not seem to care.

"Mmm? What could you be talking about, youngster? Sadly sadly, we're all old geezers. Can't remember *a thing*. By the way old boy, do you remember why we went outside?"

"I suffer from Alzheimer's, I don't know. To the toilet or something, I guess?"

"Ah, I see. Hey, that geezer over there, where was the toilet again?"

Within moments they had ad-libbed and arranged a lie. Their acting was truly masterful.

The doctor did not in the least feel like giving them praise, but he felt even less like broaching the subject.

"Whatever, you darned geezers! Hurry up and get back into your beds! Don't blame me if you get cursed to death by the grandmas!"

"Yeah yeah. Never come across such an insolent rascal that spoils this rare chance to have a chat with a young missy. That's not the stance to take towards an old man. Besides, that shrew's already six feet under. Try cursing me if you can!"

"I hope you won't regret that statement when you're six feet under too, you perverted geezer..."

While escaping from the doctor's piercing glance, the old men continued making complaints.

"Jeez... just because they don't have anything to do..."

"Ahahaha! Well, thanks to that you had the opportunity to relieve some stress, right? And *I* got some help."

He had no power left to counter her remark.

"Ah, reminds me that I took this out to be sure. Looks like I didn't need to," he said and tossed the girl a small, light-reflecting object.

It was a key chain she knew. Because she just hadn't been able to find it during the washing, she had assumed the boy had taken it with him.

"Cubby's key? Why do you mean?"

"Huh? Well, I thought you might chase after him if I leave it plugged there."

"Who should I chase after?"

"...Who else but that brat and Princess?"

In a fraction of a second, the light brownish tone in her face shifted to a chalk-white that lay level with any of the chalks in the school behind her.

"**STOP THE LOVE COMEDYYYY**!!!"

Like a streak of lightning the girl jumped on the Super Cub and plugged in the keys, upon which she kicked the starter so hard that her vehicle almost ran off without needing an engine.

"JUST WAIT, BOY!"

While popping a wheelie like in an action movie, she started driving off.

"Huh? What do you want from me?"

The next moment, she heard a response at point-blank range and Cubby's majestic front wheel came down again.

Behind her she spotted a wheel-chair pushing boy eying her suspiciously and a surprised Princess rounding her eyes.

"Eh, what? Boy?! What are you doing here?!"

"What I'm doing here...? We returned from our stroll and that's it. But what are *you* doing, girl?"

She was obliged to give him an answer.

But for her current state—in other words, wearing a white coat over her pajama with her sleeves rolled up and with sandals on her feet, mounting a bike—it was next to impossible to come up with a reasonable explanation.

After hearing a couple of times that the boy had merely joined Princess' stroll and nothing more, the girl accepted his excuse at last and her rage subsided. To begin with, while the boy was indeed in the midst of adolescence, he wasn't so devious as to lay hands on a sick girl.

Jeez, does she really have no trust at all in me?

"Why are you sighing all the time, boy?"

"Ah, no, never mind."

They were in the infirmary again, after having had dinner. To be exact, they were in a separated zone within that room that consisted of two of the three beds; they had closed the curtains of their beds and connected them.

Incidentally, Princess was undergoing an examination on the other side.

"Wait, don't tell me that you're regretting not being able to peep at Princess' examination..."

"No," he denied like a shot and continued packing.

Arranging the luggage they had spread out for drying required a well-planned approach. Considering the vast amount of luggage they had, it would have been very hard to pack up everything without employing a precise disposition.

Luckily, they had been able to earn themselves some supplies as compensation for helping in the kitchen and dishing up.

They were especially grateful for the replenishment of their medical goods as well as fuel, water and food.

In terms of fuel the had had only half a tank left.

However, since even this functioning town did not have any means of producing gasoline, thus gas being a limited good, the girl had had to pour the old men of the fishing association wine in order to get their hands on some fuel. Well, the girl had been all geared up to do it, so it had been no bad deal.

The girl tightly packed up the luggage they wouldn't be using anytime soon, and packed together the stuff they needed all the time and their luggage for sleeping, and pulled the zipper shut.

"All right! We're set for tomorrow."

"Whoa whoa, wanna get away from here so quickly? You're not in a hurry, are you?" the doctor asked from the other side of the curtain.

After giving a snort, the girl replied, "It's too risky to stay here! I don't want him to enter the wrong route, you know?"

"What?"

"Never mind!"

She clutched her blanket and rolled over.

"And that's it. Examination's over. Looks like you're fine."

"It is all thanks to you, doctor."

After Princess had said so in her bell-like voice, the curtains that had formed their separated space got opened.

"Come on, you should get ready to sleep. Our current supply gets cut at nine o'clock, okay?"

"For real?" asked the girl as she bobbed up.

"Of course for real! We only have the hydroelectric plant at the dam up the river, so we can't waste any energy, you know? Apart from the important lifelines like our hospital, this town gets current only during daytime."

"But what about Princess then? Can she do without current?" asked the boy and looked at Princess, who for some reason blushed and cast down her gaze.

"In her case, it's just that her heart's weak, so there's no need for any life-support system. What I have in this infirmary is more than enough for now."

"I see."

"Dispatched townsmen from here are operating the plant. Well, in fact they're all just amateurs, but we also got one actual employee there. With the aid of his instructions, we somehow manage to keep things running. This town *looks* like it had reserves, but it does not have any."

"...so these are hard times for anyone after all, huh."

"Kinda. Anyway! Get ready to sleep already. You go early to sleep and you'll also have to wake up early — should you sleep like a log, you'll get an alcohol sterilization from me right in the eyes."

"Yeah yeah, got it! I'll go to sleep."

The girl pulled the curtain shut and started to change clothes.

"You, too, Princess. You're worn out from all that happened today, aren't you?"

"Yes."

She returned to her bed as well, and slipped under the blanket.

"Okay then, brat, take care. I'm in the west building if you need anything."

"Aye-aye, sir," he said as he saluted.

"And little one," the doctor started.

"Mm?"

"Should he lay a finger on Princess, kill him."

"Okay! Roger that."

Please don't answer that with lightning speed...

"And boy."

"What is it now?"

"I don't mind if you plan a nightly attack on this little one, but just make sure you don't disturb Princess' sleep."

"**Get the fuck out you quack!!**"

The girl, as red as a tomato right up to her ears, tossed a two-liter bottle of water at him.

A few minutes later, just as the doctor had announced, the lights went black, marking the coming of the night for the three in the infirmary.

The first to fall asleep was the girl. Probably she had gotten quite exhausted without noticing it herself. Upon telling the boy only two or three things she had experienced that day, she dropped off.

About thirty minutes after the lights had gone out, the boy covertly lit one of the candles the room was equipped with. While paying attention that the thin altar candle didn't extinguish, he took their diary out of the luggage.

"Are you still awake...?"

"Eh..?!"

A sudden whisper made the boy raise his gaze. He brushed aside the curtain and discovered Princess, who had opened her curtain as well.

"Aah, sorry. Did I wake you up?"

"No, please do not mind it. It is just that I can't sleep because I have slept half the day already," she giggled and put on her slippers as she got off the bed. "Do you mind if I come over...?"

"Uh... ah, go ahead!" he said, hesitating a little while recalling what the doctor had told him beforehand.

Being in her pajama round the clock, perhaps she didn't give her current appearance much thought, but to the boy, a hale and hearty male, her glittering eyes in the candlelight or her delicate collarbone that looked out from her clothes were easily a bewitching spectacle for him.

While knowing his state of mind or not, she quickly got onto his bed and sat down next to him. On top of that her cheeks were blushed — or so it seemed to the boy.

While breaking into mental perspiration, he closed the diary.

"What were you doing so late at night?"

"Um, yeah, writing our diary...," he said and held the book out to her, "Take a look."

The book that passed into her hands was by no means just a thin notebook, but a splendid hardcover diary that was about five centimeters thick and had its corners brassed. There was even a brass lock to it.

"Wow, it is quite robust..."

"Found it in a bookstore in the capital. I would have preferred a lighter and thinner one, but the girl was in love at first sight."

A smile passed over his face as he recalled that page of their story. They had still been moving by bicycle during that time; he could tell a thing or two about dragging along such an unexpected and dreadful dead weight.

"Are you writing about today?"

"Yeah. There's been a lot lately. I surely don't lack writing material."

He opened the diary and started writing. He only noted down the date at the corner of the page, but no name.

"Excuse me, but why is this page blank...?" Princess asked as she pointed at the previous page.

The page that was supposed to contain the events of the prior day was completely empty.

"That was the girl's part to write! We take turns, you know."

"...But wasn't she sick that day? Why didn't you fill in for her?"

"We don't fill in for each other. Absolutely not. Or that's what the girl insists on. Once, she wrenched her right wrist and couldn't hold the pen, but she still got her way and got it down somehow."

The boy flipped through the diary and stopped at a page from mid-May. And indeed, a impressive handwriting that looked like a sloshed slug dancing Samba struck their eyes.

"Not even I can read what's written there... and she said she forgot..."

Suddenly, he noticed that Princess was staring at him. When he looked up with his heart skipping a beat, she timidly opened her mouth.

"Excuse me... but would you mind telling me about what you experience on your journey?"

"What we experienced?"

"Yes. I would love to hear your stories. May I?"

There was no reason to turn her request down.

The boy decided to tell those stories she was likely to find interesting.

Princess scurried back to her bed and returned with a set of things: some spare candles and a thermos bottle with jasmine tea—everyone's best friends for a bedtime chatter—plus hand-made cookies by Princess as their tea biscuits. With that, the preparations were set, and it looked as though they were about to start a midnight tea party. After shutting the curtain so as to not be found by a certain mean doctor, the story of the boy and girl's tour across the land began.

How they set off. How they tumbled together into a rice field when their light suddenly got broken while driving along a country path. How they almost got washed away when they tried to traverse some river because the engine of their motorbike conked out.

Furthermore, what they experienced after they had come over to this island. At ease and without haste, he told their memories, while taking a bite of her cookies or sipping at the jasmine tea from time to time.

While listening to the story about the director and Boss , Princess got teary-eyed and when he told her about the girl getting a fever, she covered her mouth.

All of those bizarre memories appeared extremely nostalgic to him, and now that he thought about it, they had had a really hard time overcoming them. In that rice field story, he had sprained his leg and had thus become unable to operate the clutch pedal, giving them no other choice but having the girl do the driving, and in that river story, the girl had almost been drowned. What had been in the story at Boss' place goes without saying.

Mysteriously, however, they all seemed like enjoyable moments when he recalled them. He could classify them as truly happy memories, not just as funny stories at his own expense.

That was most likely because the girl had been with him, being noisy at times, overhasty and a glutton bursting with energy.

The boy chose not to say that, though. Much in the world does not get conveyed without putting it into

words, but he believed that there were things that could only unfold their true value when conveyed without words.

Before he knew it, it was about to get late at night.

"...Wow, I talked quite a bit, didn't I? Aren't you sleepy ?"

"I am fine. I completely forgot the time because it was so thrilling," she giggled in an elegant manner and put the jasmine tea cups and the cookie plate into the water-filled sink.

The boy glanced at the candle, which had lost quite a lot of its size, and stood up.

"It's quite late already, so I suggest we get some rest. We have to get up early tomorrow, right?"

"Yes..."

He nodded and closed his curtain after confirming that Princess had sat down on her bed.

The shadow that passed over her face when she gave him that answer resembled what he saw earlier this day in a way.

While feeling some slight doubts arise, he went to sleep.

A human's sleep switches back and forth between a shallow phase and a deep phase, with a cycle lasting about two hours. Whether this had any influence remains unknown, but the boy woke up after four hours just.

He opened his eyes and saw a pitch-black ceiling. There was no candle burning, so it was really and truly pitch-black.

It was a riddle to him why he had woken up. He had not even slept that much since the previous day, and in fact, he was still tired.

And yet, his consciousness had awoken.

He slowly erected himself and could confirm that the girl was still sound asleep besides him. Her ability to sleep so soundly after having slept so much was already worth being called a gift.

Sadly, however, with her scratching her exposed belly, her arms and legs spread out all over the bed, her head way off the pillow and her blanket kicked off the bed, she did not exactly look like a lady. Not even like a young and wholesome student.

After letting out a sigh, he adjusted her posture and put the blanket on her. He took a little gulp of the PET bottle next to his bed and was about to return to his bed to sleep when he suddenly noticed that Princess' curtain was opened. What was more, the only thing there was the moonlight shining through the window, but she was not to be seen.

"...to the toilet, perhaps...?" he murmured and, while tilting his head, laid his hand on the masterless bed. It was too cold for assuming that she had gone to the toilet.

"Escape," he thought for a moment, but that was kind of silly. After all, this wasn't the girl, and it was a most

unlikely thought that such an obedient girl would escape in the dead of the night. Well, with her weak body, it was impossible anyway.

Then, his gaze stopped at the table next to his bed. The candle and saucer Princess had brought over for the tea party was not there anymore. Neither was the freshly-updated diary.

The boy grumbled, feeling an unrest of sorts.

He couldn't seem to sleep anymore even if he huddled into his blanket. For a restful sleep and a smooth awakening, he had no other choice but to do a good deed .

The boy slipped into his school shirt, still in his Pajama , put on his shoes and left the infirmary.

Together with a lit candle on a saucer, the boy left the school building. Since the night, as one might expect, was rather chilly, he sneezed once.

"Okay, where to start," he worried. But his worry was cleared just moments later.

He discovered a mysterious light source in the center of the school grounds. It was the same kind of candle he had with him. He could make out a silhouette sitting there with bent knees besides the orange light.

It was Princess. He didn't know why, but he could tell with with certainty.

When he approached her, Princess noticed his candle and turned to him.

"Boy..."

"You'll catch a cold if you're here at night!"

"...It is already early morning, though," she giggled. But her smile was not the bright smile from yesterday, but contained a self-deprecating tone. Something bothered the boy about it.

"What are you doing here at this time?"

He sat down next to her on the cold ground.

"...it is not like I was doing something special. Sometimes, I just cannot stay in that infirmary anymore."

"Well, it surely doesn't exactly look like it's entertaining sitting in there all day..."

"I'm only sleeping the entire day with nothing to do. To begin with, I do not have any hobbies," she said and looked up at the night sky. The moon surrounded by a sheer infinite number of stars hung in the cloudless sky. "...I have not really done anything in my life..."

"Isn't that inevitable when you have been sick all along ...?"

Princess turned to him again. The boy shrunk back a little because the candlelight lit her face in a mysterious manner.

"But I am not, you know?"

"Eh...?" His thinking failed to catch up with her strange correction.

"The word 'sick' describes the condition when a healthy body system ceases to work properly, right? And my body *is* working properly."

"But why do you..."

...live in that infirmary then. If there was no abnormality to her body, why did she not live like anyone else?

"'My heart is weak'. It is as simple as that."

"Just... weak?"

"I do not know what it is called like since the official name has vanished already, but I suffered from a sickness that involved a damaged blood flow at the heart . Innate." Again she looked up at the night sky. "That was an additional burden to my heart. After finding out about it and doing a couple of examinations, I underwent surgery when I was in the fourth year of elementary school. The surgery succeeded at closing the hole, but by that time, my heart was already worn out."

"..."

The boy kept quiet. Probably, she was not expecting his answer anyway.

"I was told that due to a hole in my cardiac wall, my heart had had to bear up against five times as much burden as a normal heart. Isn't that queer? Even though I am still sixteen, I have the heart of a granny!"

"That's why you say your heart is weak...?"

"Yes. My pulse soars up if I do just a little sports, or I get fits if I become too excited. This is also why Doctor always looks after me. I have been in his care ever since I came to this school nearly four months ago."

The boy's gaze suddenly fell on the diary in her hands.

"...Excuse me. I knew I should not, but I read it."

He wanted to tell her that she didn't have to be worried about that, but his tongue just wouldn't produce his voice for him.

While the boy was at a loss for words, Princess pressed the solid and thick diary against her chest.

"It was a great read. Your and the girl's adventures appeared vividly to me as though I was there myself. I even thought about writing a diary myself."

Suddenly, the smile on her face was lost. She tightly embraced the diary while casting her gaze to the ground.

"But it is no use. If I kept a diary, it would be solely about my heart. 'Today I got a fit', 'today I went to the

hospital', 'today I got a fever and had to stay in the infirmary', and so forth and so forth." She put on a smile again. The self-deprecating smile. "That is why I am jealous of you two. Touring across the land with someone who's really dear to you, overcoming all hurdles on the way... But to me, doing that is..."

The boy kept silent.

"I have never gone on a journey, nor have I ever gone out with friends. Back when one student after another vanished from this school, I was not sad, either, because I had not one friend," she said and stood up. With her back to the boy, she slowly walked toward the school building . "I have lived without doing anything since elementary school. And I am going to vanish without having achieved anything."

Princess twirled her white hair in her slender finger. Her pure white hair gleamed like silver in the light of the moon.

But it was a vicious light.

It was a gleam of despair that vividly portrayed that she did not have much time anymore.

Princess turned around to the boy while desperately trying to smile.

"But please do not misunderstand me. It's not like I am being pessimistic! Just look at the world. The 'vanishing' is spreading. We vanish one by one, regardless of our nationality, whether we're young or old, and about as randomly as death itself."

These words sounded as contorted to the boy as they did not suit her.

"...Once, I came to wonder if I really 'was lucky that I have not vanished'."

Unable to follow her, the boy flashed a suspicious mien for a moment.

"What do you mean?"

"I wondered if it's not that I 'did not vanish', but that I was 'left behind'."

The boy held his breath.

"Just think about it: as soon as a human deceases, his brain stops as well and his body starts to rot. But even

though it was scientifically proven that humans are just lumps of meat and the existence of souls still remains unconfirmed, trillions of people believe in a world after death. So why should I not believe in a world after vanishing, when not a thing has been learned about the ' vanishing'?" There she stopped her talk and, probably because she had gotten worked up, pressed her hand against her chest. "...Therefore, the 'vanishing' means salvation to me. If I vanish, I can join the others... without ever having to suffer... from this heart, anymore..."

There was a heavy silence between them. The originally chilly night wind felt as thought it was terribly moist, and both speaking and remaining silent required a strong will.

He didn't know after how much time, but it was the boy who opened the mouth.

".....Oh, I completely forgot!"

"Huh?"

A strange utter escaped her lips when the boy suddenly broke the silence with a stupefied voice.

"Ah, you know, I just remembered that you told me you wanted to ride Cubby yesterday."

"Well... um, yes. I did say so..."

Princess was taken aback by the sudden topic change. No wonder - her incredibly serious talk was at once replaced by the continuation of their leisure conversation from yesterday afternoon.

"Wanna try it? Now."

"Right now...?"

The boy gave Princess, who had literally rounded her eyes, a through and through mischievous grin.

"Yeah. Right now."

If "looks can kill" has yet to be confirmed, but apparently they cannot over distance. Because if they could, then the boy would have dropped dead for sure.

"**THAaT F*CkInG PLaYERrrRRrR!!!**"

The girl was glaring at the school grounds while grinding her teeth. The window frame of the entrance was screaming in pain in her hands, but the offender, the girl, was focused on the two silhouettes in the center of the grounds and did not even lend it an ear.

The desire to go to the toilet had woken her up, but then she had noticed that there was no trace of the boy and Princess, and after searching around while considering the wildest possibilities, her fears had come true, after all.

"Taking delight in the candlelight together in the dead of the night, ***my dear companion***? I wonder what their ***lovely conversation*** is about..."

Out of sheer fury, her choice of words had become polite.

From that distance she could of course make out no word of their talk, but it was obvious to the eye that they were having fun. Even worse, they were both in their

pajamas. A "slip" could happen any moment. After all, the boy was a healthy young animal boy, so he might have very well turned from a "boy" into an uncontrollable "male".

"Oh, what are you doing here, Missy?"

"MM?!"

She spun around and found the old men from yesterday afternoon. The over-energetic grandpas were assembled all together.

"UHYA! G-Good lord! What a dreadful face!"

"Wha! What's that mean?! How can you call a matchless beauty like me dreadful?!" she roared, but the old men heaved a sigh of relief.

"Oh, I was sure you'd murder us. You looked more dreadful than the one-eyed bear I once came across in the mountains when I was young."

"Even you are against me, grandpa? Jeez!"

But there she recalled her mission and turned around. The boy and Princess, who had been in the center of the school ground until moments before, weren't there anymore.

"AAHH! THEY GOT OFF!!!"

"Mm? Are you looking for a ghost or something, missy ?"

"No way, old man, no way. With that grimace of hers, any ghost would mistake her for a hellhound and flee."

"You never know! There are plenty grandpas in this school that serve as ghost candidates. At the very least, we don't lack headcount."

"Bollocks! The bunch here are all sinners that won't let go of life even when they lived out their allotted span. They go to hell before they can even think about becoming ghosts!"

"Nah! There's no real difference between a mummy and that dried-out bunch. The grim reaper will hardly be able to notice when someone bites the dust. Hey guys, do you still have your legs?"

The girl massaged her temple in bafflement. " Grandpas..... Aren't you forgetting that *you* are the representatives of that bunch you're talking about?"

"Indeed, I cannot deny that possibility. After all, we're senile grandpas," the old man answered without problem , causing the girl to let out the biggest sigh she could.

Then, she suddenly noticed something.

"Come to think of it, what are you doing here at this time, grandpas? It's three in the night, you know?"

"You shouldn't make light of us, Missy! If it's three o'clock, it's morning. Time to go to work!"

Only now the girl noticed that they weren't in their everyday clothes and pajamas anymore, but in waterproof trousers and jackets, wearing caps.

"Work? You?"

"Sure! We're putting out to sea to go fishing."

The group of old men guffawed all together.

"But grandpas, haven't you reached the retirement a—no, didn't you retire already? You belong to the retirement home, don't you?"

"Well, we do. But you see, unfortunately the young fisher folks have almost entirely gone away. In the beginning, we tried to leave the fishing to all the office worker who had nothing to do, but they don't know how to steer a boat. They don't know how to fish, either. Well, and the next in line to play instructor was us old crocks!"

"Are you okay? Won't you suddenly kick the bucket when a big one bites?"

"No worries. Should that happen, I'll throw him into the sea and catch a whale or something with him."

"Fiddlesticks! You won't catch a whale with dried fodder like us. You won't even get a shark to drop by!"

Again the group guffawed at the remark of one of them.

"Seems like hard work, huh...," the girl said, half-impressed, half-dumbfounded.

"Oh well, you can say that. But you know, I have watched enough Mito Koumon in the assembly room of the retirement home. It's a good way to kill time."

"Word! That show gets boring over time, it's not even funny. Why should grandpas watch stories about grandpas? We want to get to watch some emotive love dramas, too!"

"...As long as you are here, grandpas, this town is safe, " the girl laughed lopsidedly and caused a laughter around her.

Suddenly, she heard the familiar buzzing of an engine from somewhere. That dull but somehow strong sound was bound to be their Super Cub's.

"Oh? Doesn't that sound come from your motorbike?"

"Yes, it does! The boy and Princess have met secretly. Don't know what they're up to, though."

The old men laughed upon hearing her sour explanation.

"Now if that's no emergency! That lad might elope with Princess! Should you really be lazing about here?"

"That's impossible. Absolutely."

Her point-blank confident answer baffled the old men for a moment. They had expected that she would rush to the boy, full of anxiety.

Targeted by countless wondering gazes, she scratched her head.

"Since it looks like you haven't realized yet, let me tell you something," she started, spread her legs and crossed her arms. "You know what? The boy is mine. And I'm his . Therefore, he's not going to elope with anyone," she said with absolute conviction.

With a snort she strutted back into the school.

While gazing after her, the old men laughed again.

"...Now that's something. Looks like that lad won't get away."

"Indeed... but oh..."

"What's wrong, old boy? Hemorrhoids?"

"Bollocks! ...I just, you know... imagined what this missy will be like when she's old..."

"....."

There was a silence.

The buzzing of the engine echoed through the nightly streets. Now that there weren't any artificial sounds, the noise from the exhaust pipe sounded louder than ever.

The Super Cub, which had been stopped by the school gates, had dried by now and was gleaming like a brand-new vehicle when lit by the moon.

"Wow... It has been a long time since I last heard the engine of a motorcycle..."

"So there are really none? Actually, I've been thinking all along that the inhabitants of this town must have

assembled all cars and such at one place to drain out their fuel because I saw none."

"Yes. We transport things in bicycle trailers, whereas we ourselves go by bicycle. Electric cars run with a battery, so we only use fuel for our boats. But we're in the course of attempting different ways to operate them with electricity as well... "

"I see. Well, get on for now," the boy said as he patted the saddle.

"Y-Yes!"

When the girl had washed the silver Super Cub and had spread out the luggage to dry, all luggage had been taken off, so there was nothing on it but a tandem seat built with a blanket.

He had removed the stand, but Princess seemed like she couldn't calm down.

"E-Excuse... me, but...," she stuttered while looking at the boy, expecting something from him.

Seeing that his presumption had proven true, the boy put on a mischievous smile. "I'm sorry to let you down,

but I don't let anyone use my tandem except for the girl. So, you're sitting up front."

Princess's jaw dropped for a moment.

"Y-You cannot be meaning to let me drive?"

"Well, the one who sits up front drives."

"Does that mean I have to operate the handle and the brakes?!"

"Sorta. Because that's what we call 'driving'."

It was finally conveyed to her that the boy was " serious".

"No way...! I have only ridden a bicycle until now..."

"Well? Isn't that what's normal for a sixteen years old?"

"I don't even have a license..."

"Neither do I and the girl! We practiced on the way and worked it out ourselves."

Implicitly shattering her last resort, the boy got on the tandem.

"You're next. Come!"

Princess took his hand, and while hers was trembling, he managed to pull her onto the bike without resistance.

"It gets kinda cold when you're riding, so better put this on."

The boy put his jacket on her and she, in a fluster, slipped into its sleeves. The diary they stowed away in the front cage.

However, the moment she was confronted with the handle and the clutch pedal, she froze.

"No... I just can't..."

"Mm... yeah, operating the clutch pedal without knowing how is a little hard. Okay! I'll take over the footwork! You only have to operate the handle and throttle."

The boy stretched out his legs and placed them on the pedals. He grabbed her trembling hands and put them on the handle.

"Okay, let's GOO!!"

He suddenly and vigorously stepped on the accelerator.

Giving Princess not even time to gulp, the Super Cub sped up at once.

"KYAAAAAA?!"

"Come on, come on! I'm letting go! We're not wearing a helmet, so we'll go to heaven if we fall!"

"EEH?! Wai..!"

Princess quickly grabbed the handle in place of the boy , who had irresponsibly stopped steering. Because she had probably not been on a two-wheeler in years, the vehicle started to sway left and right.

"I can't!! I just can't!!"

"Cool down, cool down. Look, we're getting on."

The rampaging Super Cub with the two on it was beyond the school gates in no time and made a left turn while almost crashing into the wall before a house.

"I am dying! I am going to die!"

"You won't, unless we fall."

"I'm saying this because we are about to fall!"

In truth, they would have stopped immediately if she just took her hands from the the throttle. However, the boy was in a mischievous mood, so he didn't tell her.

"By the way, Princess. Do you know what's over there on the right?"

"Eh?"

Because of his question, she turned the handle to the right, half unconsciously.

They cut a smooth curve—and arrived on the long, long slope they had walked down yesterday. The road led straight down to the port without any obstacle.

"...KYAAAAAAAAA!!!?"

At the same time as the motorbike accelerated fiercely, Princess' scream advanced from "a scream of fear" to "a scream for her life". The wind that was whipping against her face also contributed to her growing confusion.

"Look at this! The needle of the speedometer went past the max! If we tumble at this speed, we're dead for good. "

"No!! Stop...!!"

"Aah, please don't use the handle brake. It's for the front brake, you know. The rear brake is operated via the pedals. If you operate the front brake at this speed... you can figure, right?"

"What?! That's cruel!"

"Now, now. I'm keeping you company."

"Expecting that you will be taken with me to the next world?!"

The Super Cub bombed down the slope at a monstrous speed.

In truth, however, they probably weren't that fast, but she didn't notice because the maximum of the speedometer was set at 60kmph. But considering it was her first ride on a motorbike and she didn't know how to slow down, her dread must have been beyond the normal. Her head was blanked out with pure panic, in the end depriving her of any clear thoughts until they reached the bottom.

"Come on, turn the handle or we're going straight into the sea!"

Upon hearing his words, Princess' got as pale as one can get. Before her eyes was a crossroad, and further ahead was the sea. What was going to happen to her weakened heart if she suddenly leaped into the sea, at night and on this island?

It was obvious. Her heart creaked when the word " death" immediately came up in her head.

At once, her hands turned the handle of themselves.

The boy, trying to assist her, leaned toward one side, making the plastic cowling scrape against the ground.

Thanks to the charity of the gods or the protection of a devil, the silver Super Cub successfully cut a curve and smoothly recovered its posture.

With their field of vision returned from lopsided to even, they drove down a straight road along the sea while finally slowing down.

Princess' horror suddenly broke off and she let go of the handle.

"Whoops," the boy said as he took over for her and continued to slowly apply the brakes. Princess pressed both her hands against her heart while breathing wildly.

Concerned about her, the boy looked at her from behind her shoulders.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes... I was just, a little startled..."

He smoothly returned the handle to her and opened his mouth.

The teasing tone had disappeared from his voice, which had turned calm now.

"...Um, listen."

"Eh?"

The boy paused, sorting his thoughts, and continued a few moments later, "...Listen, I think this way it's a waste. "

"What is...?"

"Your life. Your life from now until you vanish someday."

Princess held her breath.

"You know, it's not like I came all way here on my own ! I am only here now because the girl and I supported each other. Besides, we didn't come by foot. We had were supported by these 60kmph fast feet of Cubby's," he said as he kicked the cowling. "And still we would not have been able to come this far just by three of us. We received help from people we met underway. *Lots* of help." He tapped her head. "Look, you did it. You're riding Cubby. Maybe you can only barely do sports, maybe your body is weak. But look, you're riding right here, right now. Come, try speeding up."

"......Yes."

She opened the throttle, upon which the Super Cub obediently accelerated. The scenery that passed by their sides got faster as well, and the wind against their face grew stronger.

"Look, you're riding. And you'll get the knack of operating the clutch pedal with some practice! I even think it's easier than learning how to ride a bicycle."

"But for me... doing that is..."

"Impossible? Really?"

Princess could not see the mischievous grin that flashed on his face.

"Was there anything lately you gave your all for?"

"...!" she held her breath.

"See? That's why I think it's a waste. It's still too early to give up everything! At least when you still have energy and time left," he said and continued, "Besides, even if you can't do it alone, there are lots of kind and good-willed people around you, aren't there? Those

people aren't kind to you because they are scheming something or have some ulterior motive. So why don't you just take advantage of their goodwill? You can still show your gratitude afterwards."

A smile escaped her lips upon hearing his rather outrageous advise.

"...it is a little rude to put it that way, isn't it?"

"The best way to appreciate goodwill is to accept it! Just take me for an example: if you told me that you wanted to go on a journey and needed my help, I would gladly lend you a hand! A smooch on the cheek will do as compensation."

"Really...? Maybe I should say so, then?"

Princess took a breath and, without turning around, spoke in a slightly louder voice than normally so that the boy behind her could hear her.

"'I want to go on a journey and I need your help.'"

"...All right! Just leave it to me. Sadly, I can't take you

with us because Cubby can only carry two persons, but instead, I shall teach you the secrets of traveling."

"The secrets of traveling?"

"Yeah. The innermost secrets from an experienced traveler. They're indispensable, I tell you!"

"Please teach let me in on them!"

"All right, wash out your ears! ...No, you don't have to actually do that, just listen. The first secret: 'Absolutely go to the toilet before setting off'."

"Haha, you sound as if you were talking about a school excursion."

"You mustn't make light of that! It's not the first secret by chance! You know, two weeks after we set off on our journey———"

Neither of them had really gotten any sleep, but the boy and Princess and Super Cub continued their joyful chat nevertheless. The two humans and machine drove along a long, straight road along the sea while lit by the rising sun.

In the end it was four o'clock when they returned to the infirmary.

By that time the sun had already risen, and the early-rising town was slowly starting to brim with life.

He didn't know what time Doc had planned for them to wake up, but he guessed that he could consider himself lucky if he had more than one more hour of sleep . After stopping Cubby where it has been before and having the tired Princess go to sleep, he quickly turned to his own bed.

However, there was something inside. In his bed.

"....."

A human-shaped bulge in his blanket easefully was rising and sinking along with a calm breath.

He moved his gaze to the girl's bed, but it was empty. In order to confirm a half-confirmed assumption, he pulled away the blanket.

As expected, he found the girl underneath, sleeping there while hugging his pillow.

He didn't know whether she willfully broke into his bed or just mistook it because she was half-awake, or if there was even another reason, but there she was, sleeping in his bed.

This situation left him with two options.

Either he went into her empty bed while grumbling, or he could seize the opportunity and sleep in the same bed as her.

The boy immediately selected the latter, for he was a healthy young boy. As a man, there was no way round choosing this, as it allowed him to sleep together with his beloved girl as well as see her blushing because it was her sneaking into his bed. He could not let this opportunity slip, since the last time he had that chance, the night before, he was sound asleep and shortly afterwards knocked out.

He braced himself and sneaked under the blanket. The missing pillow he substituted by borrowing the one in the girl's bed. He made himself comfortable besides the girl and relaxed.

The next moment, he found himself in a headlock.

"...?" Princess tilted her head.

She was hearing strange noises from beyond the curtain. The boy's bed was creaking up and down along with a sound that resembled the death cry of a tuna.

Was he doing some special exercise for his health before going to bed?

After a while and something that sounded like the scream of a duck that was being necked, it grew silent again.

Apparently, he finished his exercise. Princess let out a small sigh and snuggled herself into her blanket.

Although she couldn't remember it afterwards, she had a wonderful dream.

By the time the clock hand showed nine o'clock, the girl was to be found in front of their Super Cub.

She seemed somewhat moody, but she did not slack off while doing her work, which was much like her.

She had also returned the pajama and was in her usual school uniform again. Of course, she was not as foolish as to set against the sun, which was shining up in the blue sky like there were no tomorrow, with her full winter uniform. As she was used to, she had taken off the jacket and only wore the shirt.

However, for some reason there was no boy.

"Damn, are you really setting off already? Somehow I have the feeling that you haven't payed off your debts yet," he sighed deeply and scowled at the girl.

The doctor had taken off his white coat and was in the suit he usually wore, but she thought that toilet sandals and sunglasses suited him horribly in that outfit.

"Please put it on the bill. We'll pay up the next time we come here."

"And when would that be?"

"Well..."

The girl scratched her head and started to count with her fingers.

In the meantime, the boy returned from the shopping district with a small packet in his hands.

While gazing at the boy, who helped loading their stuff, the doctor let out another sigh.

"...Where do you guys want to go, anyway?"

"What a silly question!" the girl giggled and exchanged glances with the boy.

""To the end of the world!""

Having his question answered by both of them simultaneously, the doctor rounded his eyes. He laughed up, flabbergasted, and removed his sunglass.

"...in that case I would be stupid if I didn't demand a ridiculously high interest rate."

"Hey, hey, Doctor. Please do not play mean!" someone joked from behind, causing him to turn around.

There he found a Princess who had not only waived her wheelchair, but was not even wearing her pajama.

Of course she wasn't naked, but in a casual outfit consisting of beige slacks and a white T-shirt with a print . They had only known her since half a day, but still this outfit looked very fresh to them.

"What the..."

Seeing the doctor's jaw drop, a smile escaped the boy's lips.

"Okay, all set."

The girl patted the tandem seat and confirmed that the rope around their luggage was properly tensed.

"Boy! Provisions?"

"Loaded."

"Medicine?"

"Perfect."

"Water?"

"Full tank."

"Gas?"

"Full tank."

"Belly?"

"Full."

"Toilet?"

"Settled!"

He gave her the thumbs up and put on his half-helmet as always.

Watching him, Princess giggled.

"Cubby-chan looks quite different compared to yesterday."

Fair enough. All luggage had been taken off the time Princess had ridden on it.

"Is it really not going to break under such a heavy load ?"

"Yeah, don't worry:"

He was about to add, "This motorbike is tough, you know!" but then he suddenly flashed a grin, and instead he said, "...In that case, Princess, would you mind helping us make it a bit lighter?"

"?"

A question mark popped up above her head because of his sudden proposal.

"Here, I give this to you."

He fished out a A5-sized thick book from the luggage and held it out to her. It was a diary with a light bluish cover. As was right and proper, it was equipped with a belt and a small lock.

"This is..."

It was quite heavy when she took it into her hands. Though not as much as theirs, the cover was thick. It was a well-made diary.

"Where did you...?"

"I fetched it in a bookstore in the shopping district just now. Be it riding, be it keeping a diary, I think it's important to get started," he said, smiling.

Princess gulped and opened the lock with a tiny key and a nice-sounding click.

While trying to calm down her throbbing heart, she gently opened the binding. With the fresh glue creaking slightly, a page appeared that had never been opened before.

This diary was still empty. All of its easily over 300 pages were completely blank. Not even a date was written there.

I am going to fill it.

"Haha!"

Oh dear,

The tears won't stop.

As she couldn't seem to keep calm if she looked at it any

longer, she closed the book as gently as she opened it. After closing the lock, she looked up at the boy.

"...Thank you so much. I will keep it dear."

"M. If you manage to fill all the pages, a nice present from me is waiting for...," and there the girl hit his head.

"Don't make promises you can't keep! Jeez... always giving the presents to other girls..."

Upon hearing the girl's monologue, which also contained some of her real thoughts, Princess tightly embraced the diary in her hands, stroking the pretty blue cover and pressing her cheeks against it as if it were a baby.

"Forget it, I have already received this! It is mine now. I will absolutely not give it back."

"Wha?!"

A smile escaped Doctor's lips, who had been watching Princess talk more than ever.

"...Kidding aside, where do you plan on going now? And I'm not talking about 'the end of the world', but your next concrete destination."

"Aah, haven't thought about that... We originally headed up north because we guessed it would get hot."

"Then go southwards."

His suggestion caused all three to cock their heads.

"According to what I heard from a recent evacuee, there's a ferryboat somewhere on the Noto Peninsula that leaves for the mainland about once every month. You can pass over to the mainland if you have them give you a lift."

The boy and girl exchanged glances.

"The mainland, huh... Sounds fun, but I can't speak any Chinese..."

"Why should you care? They don't understand your language, either, so it's fair game!"

His logic was quite absurd, but since they indeed were on an island, it was true that there was no way around either making a U-turn or traversing the ocean. Perhaps it was just right to have a concrete target when they were going southwards anyway. It was also true, that they weren't exactly looking forward to spending the winter on this island.

"But we should have known that a little earlier..."

"Well, that can't be helped," the boy smiled and jumped on the saddle.

"All right, give the grandpas my regards."

"Got it. But it remains to be seen if they remember it because I bet they're drowning the loss of their Missy in an alcohol feast."

"Ahaha! You're in charge of keeping them here when they're about to kick the bucket, Doc!"

"Must be a bad joke. How many crocks that are about to do exactly that do you think we have here? I'll need at least one company of emergency doctors!"

While these two were laughing together, Princess approached the boy.

"Please hang in there and protect the girl."

"Roger. But hang in there as well, okay? There are many obstacles to overcome."

"Yes. Ah... and you forgot something."

"Eh?"

The boy spun around to the carrier.

In that momentary gap, Princess stretched herself.

Smooch A sound as delicate as the tweet of a bird resounded, followed by the soft touch on his cheek.

As if the whole world had turned mute, everyone became silent and gazed at Princess, whose cheeks had reddened slightly. Especially the girl and doctor were bereft of speech and had their very eyes torn open to the limit.

"...As you wished, the smooch reward for the 'secrets' you taught me," Princess laughed mischievously.

It was a joyful smile that neither the boy, nor the girl, nor the doctor and not even Princess herself had ever seen before.

However, hell itself was waiting for the boy.

"You bastard!! **TRAITOOOORRR!!**"

Once again he was captured in her headlock and was being choked.

"I'm... I'm dying! I'm dying!"

The boy hurriedly opened the throttle and sped up. But the girl showed no fear at all and continued squeezing his neck.

While completely ignoring the wondering glances of Doctor and Princess, the Super Cub wriggled out of the school grounds with its driver slowly losing his life energy.

Interlude

As soon as the Super Cub engine had entirely become inaudible, the doctor whispered, "...That was a noisy duo. "

"Yes. And I am jealous of that."

Surprised by her words, he looked at her. He knew Princess as a girl who would never ever say it aloud even if she was jealous of anyone. He didn't know whether this was to pay respect to the others or to keep herself from feeling small, but not once he had heard that word from her mouth in the couple of months he had spent with her.

He also didn't know whether she was aware of her own change, but her countenance was clearly different from before. He could not even imagine what had happened between her and the boy the previous night.

Suddenly, he spotted a small something by the feet of Princess', whom he had gazed at.

It was a longish piece of paper with letters on it. Apparently, it was a bookmark made of thick paper. One side had been perforated and adorned with a pink ribbon .

The bookmark seemed to be hand-made, but its shape was a little uneven. Probably it had been made in a hurry .

"Hey Princess, what's this?"

"?"

She accepted the piece of paper Doctor had picked up and read the letters on it. She recognized it as the boy's writing because it resembled the handwriting she had seen in his diary. Written with clean letters, it read, "...' From the owner of Diary #1 to the owner of the Diary #2, the innermost secret. There is one rule you must keep whatever it takes when you write into this diary.'..."

The text stopped there and continued on the backside. The doctor, peeking interestedly at the text from beside her, wondered what was meant by 'innermost secret'.

Princess, still brimming with curiosity, flipped the bookmark around.

"...'Do not write any names in this diary. Be it your own names or the names of people and places you come across: you must not write any proper nouns. If you observe this rule, your writings shall remain'..."

Like a damaged light, it required a few moments until she understood what it said. And it struck her like a thunderbolt.

This bookmark showed the way to the loophole in the ' vanishing'.

When a person disappears due to the 'vanishing', it's the notifications of his name, the photographs and painting taken of him, the paintings by him and texts written by him that disappear along with him.

In the case of texts, unless it can be recognized at a glance that it was written by him, only those disappear that have the signature of the vanishing person.

That's why the "stop" signs on the streets didn't disappear and why parts of signboards that hadn't contained the shop's name were still there.

In that case, it was possible to leave behind texts by making it unclear "who has written it" and "who it was about".

It was possible to engrave one's trails in the world.

For a while Princess was absorbed in thought, while embracing the diary into which she had put the bookmark.

Though as dear the two travelers were to her, she had forgot about them for a moment and was thinking about her own path.

Before her eyes were the wide open school gates. Until now, these gates had been the start point as well as the goal for her strolls into town.

The gates themselves had not changed, but it was not too much to say that the world in Princess' eyes had undergone a radical change.

The possibility of going to other cities—even to other countries—beyond these gates had suddenly appeared to her.

The hope in the unknown, the thirst for the unknown and the fear from the unknown. Her rationality was telling her to stop such a reckless endeavor, but the boy's voice was still echoing in her heart. The love for her hometown was holding her back, but there was an empty diary in her chest.

All sorts of thoughts were running and dancing through her head.

However, she wiped away that chaos with just one deep breath.

"...Doctor."

"Mm?"

The school doctor looked at Princess who had just turned to him.

"I... want to go on a journey and I need your help."

For a split second, he rounded his eyes and looked away then.

He put on his sunglasses to conceal his eyes and started a tap dance of indecision and distress by doing strange things like scratching his head in some kind of agony, crossing his arms, meaninglessly checking the time or looking up at the sky to see how the weather was. It was the moment that his cool and collected style was shattered to pieces.

"...No...?"

No one know whether the doctor understood the concept of a man's weakness or not.

If he did or not, this word, spoken by a weak beauty with tough luck who looked up at him with puppy eyes in a pleading voice right before his eyes, pierced his heart for sure.

"...Come to think of it, a pal of mine from the medical school who works at the hospital now told me that he wanted to get rid of one of his motorbikes. One with a sidecar."

"Yahoo! You come with me, don't you, doctor?!"

"Y-Yeah. I guess I'll have the hospital dispatch someone for the old crocks here."

"But I am driving, okay?"

"HAA?! It's a large-size motorbike, you know?! The dead weight is easily three times your weight!"

"I do not care! Nothing is impossible with some practice! So I am looking forward to your instructing!"

"O-Okay...," he nodded, and while doing so, fired up his imagination.

What he saw was a slender Princess on a large motorbike in a black leather suit, wearing classic goggles and a crimson scarf, and himself in the sidecar, frantically trying to fit his legs into the sparse space.

"...Just one request, Princess."

"What is it, Doctor?"

".....Can we take turns at least?"

This was the start of Princess' journey. And the first page of her diary was sure to tell the events of that day.

1. ↑ If you are interested, the original text refers to a so-called "Juunihitoe". http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juunihitoe

Epilogue

A Super Cub was driving down a long straight road under the blazing sun.

It was silver and equipped with an improvised tandem seat and additional carriers to both sides.

The Super Cub was ridden by a boy and a girl.

The boy, wearing a half-helmet with built-in goggles, was sixteen years old. He was wearing a blazer-style uniform.

The girl, wearing a read half-helmet without goggles, was sixteen as well. And just like him, she was wearing a blazer-style uniform.

Their route had changed from northwards to southwards, but what had not changed was that they drove silently and steadily.

By that time, the girl had finally recovered her mood and was obediently clinging to his back. The hands around his waist and the additional heat against his back was supposed to be annoying to him, but for some reason he was pleased by it.

"...Boy?"

"Mh, what's up, girl?"

The unstopping roaring of the engine blended into the wind and became their background music.

"Do you still remember when I asked you to go on a journey with me?"

"Of course."

A smile escaped his lips when he recalled that dear recollection.

How could he ever forget? He had spent the days after losing his entire family and entering a new school without a particular reason with observing the slow motion of the clock, finding himself unable to have any hopes in tomorrow and yet unable to fall into despair.

But one day, all of a sudden, a classmate of his appeared before him. Not only had he forgotten her name, he could hardly even remember her face. Despite everything, she invited him to an aimless journey.

If he thought about it now, he realized how reckless that start was.

Of course he asked, "Why would you want to do that?"

And she replied with an honest smile, "Because it could be fun."

Everything after taking her hand unconsciously happened like a flash. Leaving their bags and everything behind, they slipped out of school in their uniforms and left the capital on a bicycle without delay.

He hadn't really thought about it deeply. He had simply felt that going on a planless journey with her was much more fun than idling away in the city.

And this feeling had not changed to date.

"I couldn't forget about it even if I wanted! That's how impressive it was," he laughed and felt the girl press her face against his back.

The distance between them had not changed at all in these three months. Neither had the distance shrunk, nor grown.

But the relationship between them had changed a little .

The journey of the boy, the girl and the Super Cub was not going to end like this. Neither could he, nor did he want to let it end.

"But say, boy. If you could return to the day before we set off... what would you do? Would spend again three months with me to come all the way here?"

He narrowed his eyes a little.

Her question was vague, impossible and no use thinking about. But the emotions the girl had put into that question were much more than just simple curiosity.

He gulped down the lump in his throat the awkward silence had caused.

"Let's see... I think I wouldn't!"

"Eh...?" Her heart skipped a beat. "...Does that mean that..."

He giggled weakly and continued with a smile, "...I didn't think it would take so long to get here to this island! If I could return to that day, I would absolutely change our destination. No doubt."

With a thump the girl knocked her helmet against his back. He could not see her face, but the moisture on his shirt conveyed much more to him than his vision.

"...Yeah. You're right."

Normally, the boy would have talked his way out and changed the topic at this point. But today and only today, he chose to go a step ahead. Collecting his courage, he continued:

"But as long as you're with me, I don't care where we go."

Be it the end of the world, the depths of hell or beyond nothingness.

I don't care!

"...Mm. Thanks," she said as she pressed her face against his back.

The sun high up in the sky was burning their backs, but the moisture on the boy's back did not dry for a while .

A motorbike is driving down a long straight road on the northern continent. No one knows where their journey is headed—except for a Super Cub and a diary.

Afterword

I wrote this book one month before the deadline of the Dengeki Novel Prize.

I had almost completely given up my hope because I had come to a dead end in the novel I had been writing since a year in every detail.

The remarks of my friends, such as "Oh, there's only one month left until the deadline," or "I'll be baffled if you manage in time starting now," were what got me writing.

And because I had no time, I just started noting down a prologue without setting any story elements, without setting any names, just placing a hero and a heroine, and that's when I stroke on the idea of writing a light novel without any proper nouns. In a way you could say that this novel was born by that close deadline.

"How would you spend today if you knew you would die tomorrow?"

We come across this question from time to time. But how about this:

"What would you do if you could leave nothing behind after dying?"

That was kind of the start point of this novel.

A boy and a girl go on a journey to find the answer. However, they aren't trying to find the answer somewhere on the way, but to find out through making the experience of traveling. That's what I consider is the way they have chosen.

I still remember the day I submitted this novel. I wasn't aiming for a prize (only in my fancies), not 1‰. Honestly though, I remember that I thought my story might make it about to the second round.

I had not taken part in any contest like the Dengeki Novel Prize before anyway, and didn't know how my skill compared to the others. I actually thought it was some sort of nuisance phone call when I was told that I made it to the final selection.

Anyway, I was able to publish this novel only thanks to my friends who helped me spice up the text, the editorial team who supported this slow-witted writer

and everyone who rooted for me. The number of directions I cannot stretch my legs out in at night has grown quite a bit during this year.

By the way, I am still searching for the answer of my aforementioned question myself. As I love making things , I really don't want to suffer from the 'vanishing'. I give it my all not to come to the conclusion of "idling away while giving myself to my desires".

Well, it's time to say goodbye.

I hope that my poor writing skills have served you to kill some time.

- Tadahito Yorozuya

I am Houmitsu and had the honor of drawing the illustrations.

I really love this story, so I gave my best.
I just hope that I managed to portray their journey satisfactory...